

THE NORTH AMERICAN BOOK OF
ICELANDIC VERSE

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ICELANDIC VERSE

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ICELANDIC VERSE

by Watson Kirkconnell

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DEDICATION

*Maid of the mountain and the misty sea,
Born in the Viking hearts of by-gone days,
Cradled amid cold waves and darkened ways,
Reared 'neath stern ramparts of sterility,
Early thou grewst to stature proudly free—
Sitting by grim Thingvellir's lava maze
The laws and lives of freemen to appraise,
Framing our age's first democracy.*

*Nations thy youth knew not salute thee now,
Honour the thousand years thy faith has wrought.
Take, then, as tokens of the love we vow,
Echoes that answer as thy poets sung,
Fragments of music from thy minstrels caught
Tuned to the tribute of an alien tongue.*

W. K.

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THE NORTH AMERICAN BOOK OF
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PREFACE

THIS VOLUME is the first of a series of twenty-four *North American Books of European Verse* which

I am preparing for publication during the next twelve years. Materials for the whole series, involving some fifty languages in all, have been collected and organized, and the work is going forward according to a definite schedule. The twenty-three subsequent volumes are: (2) The Book of Magyar Verse (including Ostiak); (3) The Book of Polish Verse (including Wendish); (4) The Book of Jewish Verse (Hebrew and Yiddish); (5) The Book of Ukrainian Verse; (6) The Book of Russian Verse (including White Russian); (7) The Book of Czechoslovak Verse; (8) The Book of Southern Slavic Verse (Slovene, Serb-Croat, and Bulgar); (9) The Book of Swedish Verse; (10) The Book of Danish and Norwegian Verse; (11) The Book of Dutch Verse (including Flemish and Frisian); (12) The Book of English Verse (especially Old and Middle English); (13) The Book of German Verse (including Plattdeutsch); (14) The Book of Swiss Verse (from German, French, Italian, and Rhaetoromanic); (15) The Book of French Verse (including Provençal and the French of Belgium); (16) The Book of Spanish Verse (including Catalan and Basque); (17) The Book of Portuguese Verse (including Gallegan); (18) The Book of Italian Verse (including Classical Latin); (19) The Book of Rumanian Verse (including Romany); (20) The Book of Gaelic Verse (Irish, Manx, and Scotch); (21) The

Book of Welsh Verse (including Cornish and Breton); (22) The Book of Finnic Verse (Finnish, Estonian, Votiak, and Lappish); (23) The Book of Baltic Verse (Lithuanian and Lettish); and (24) The Book of Greek Verse (Ancient, Byzantine, and Modern; including also Albanian).

Each volume is to include an introductory history of the poetic literature in question, a copious and representative mass of translations in the original metres (so far as differences of linguistic texture will permit), and notes for the general reader. Volumes which include more than one poetry will treat each one separately and fully in this same manner. Wherever, as in Icelandic, German, or Greek, there is significant poetry in the older stages of the language, this will be included along with the modern verse, thus providing a proper perspective for comprehending the literature as a whole. The twenty-four volumes, taken in their entirety, will provide a conspectus of the poetic tradition and inheritance of Europe on a scale hitherto unavailable in any language.

For a scholar to dedicate the best years of his life to so arduous an undertaking presumes a great enthusiasm. One does not undertake, single-handed, to translate and interpret the poetries of fifty peoples without the compulsion of a ruling passion. There are, as a matter of fact, two such impelling forces.

The first is a consuming interest in the various literatures themselves. While interested in linguistics from childhood up, I have always felt that philology considered apart from life was a stick out of a dry ground, and have regarded language rather as a medium through which the spirit of man has been able to express itself in power and beauty. I have already explored (and translated from) all of the languages of Europe, and have found in that study a pro-

gressive enlargement of delight "whose margin fades forever and forever as I move".

But with this love of comparative literature (which does not necessarily make for publication) there has been blended the compelling sense of a great opportunity. On this North American continent I find folk of all the stocks and traditions of Europe; I find, too, that barriers of language make for grave misunderstanding and misjudgment on the part of all citizens, "old" and "new"; I disagree profoundly with those who would hack off completely all roots of European culture and then hew the mutilated trunk into conformity with some arbitrary nationalistic pattern; I believe rather that the perpetuation of the finest elements of Old World culture will incalculably enrich the life of the New World. This is the corner-stone of my venture. North Americans of Welsh or Scottish extraction are not worse but better citizens when they can still proudly drink from the springs of their ancestral literatures. Shall we not likewise seek to cherish the magnificent literatures which are the heritage of nearly every European stock?

This is not to Balkanize the New World. I do not suggest that fifty linguistic communities be left in uncoordinated isolation, without the integrating influences of an advanced system of education. But I do claim that every effort should be made, especially by the higher educational authorities, to weave into the fabric of national consciousness the brightest threads of European culture. The finest stimulus to great achievements in the future is a consciousness of great achievements in the past; and if all citizens, of whatever racial extraction, felt that the cultural glories of their past were known and appreciated by the community, it would be a spur to further high accomplishment. Mutual knowledge, mutual sympathy, and mutual emulation in cultural attainments would surely shape a national life of astonishing

richness. "The good European" has long been the cultural ideal of the finer spirits throughout that Continent. What better gift could North America make to the world than the creation of a society in which cultural catholicity of sympathy and enlightenment was the birthright of every citizen?

The present volume is also intended as an admiring tribute to the people of Iceland on the one-thousandth birthday of the parliament founded in their little subarctic republic in the year 930. At such a time of festivity, North Americans will like to recall not only that Icelanders have the oldest parliament in the world, but that they have a magnificent poetic record extending over more than a thousand years and that their sagas represent the most important contribution made by any European people to world literature in the thirteen centuries between Vergil and Dante.

As for the translations, the aim throughout has been to provide versions which might furnish pleasure and interest for the general reader. The book has not been prepared for a handful of specialists nor as a "crib" for elementary students straining over the originals. It is designed primarily to give the average reader a sympathetic knowledge of Icelandic poetry as poetry. Hence the most rigid requirements of the Icelandic metres and idioms have occasionally been relaxed where their enforcement tended to produce wooden distortions of language that were neither English nor poetry. Hence, too, the Icelandic letters "eth" and "thorn" have regularly been transliterated by "d" and "th" respectively, as their retention (however scholarly) would have been an infallible source of confusion to the public. Similarly the customary breaking up of the old epic lines into hemistichs and the arbitrary binding of the lines into stanzas (practices condemned by Vigfusson and Powell as utterly wrong in principle) have been avoided as a glaring source of annoyance to the layman. The biblio-

graphical information given in the biographical notes is not intended to be exhaustive; prose works have in general been omitted and no care has been taken to list all of the editions of poetic works that have been published more than once. In this connection I might add that eleventh-hour restrictions of space have compelled the reluctant omission of more than a score of contemporary poets from whom translations had already been prepared.

In dealing with the Eddic poetry, I have usually followed the text of Finnur Jónsson, but to secure a version of modern appeal I have occasionally accepted suggestions from other scholars. The unpedantic sanity of Vigfusson and Powell has been a constant inspiration. In the more recent period, I have been very greatly indebted to the *Íslensk Lestrarbók* of Prof. Sigurdur Nordal and to Prof. Halldór Hermansson's *Icelandic Authors of To-day*. I would also express my deep obligation to Mr. Snæbjörn Jónsson of Reykjavík and Dr. Rögnvaldur Pétursson of Winnipeg for advice on problems of editing.

W. K.

INTRODUCTION

UP WHERE the North Atlantic nears the Arctic Circle 500 miles from Scotland and 600 from Norway, lies an island considerably larger than Ireland. Subterranean fires writhe in the rocks beneath it, while upon its volcanic peaks and lava plateaux lie the largest glaciers of Europe. It is a land virtually without forests, without coal or economic minerals, and without grain-crops; but its waters teem with fish and its scenery is among the most magnificent in the world.

By the year 795 A.D., the Irish had settled colonists in the island; but after 872, when King Harald Fair-hair broke the power of the independent chieftains of Norway at Hafsrfjord, thousands of Viking fugitives, preferring exile to subjection, settled in this distant retreat. By them it was called Iceland. In the next half-century the population of the island had grown to 50,000 and an aristocratic republic had been organized, with a supreme parliament or Althing, founded in 930.

This Viking Age was in poetry an EPIC PERIOD comparable to the Homeric Age in Greece. A great epic tradition, evolved no doubt through long centuries of conscious elaboration, was nearing its height. Professional bards composed magnificent poetry in alliterative measures and (in an age when writing was still unknown) preserved and modified in memory the great verses of their predecessors. A vast amount of such verse prevailed throughout all the ancient Germanic peoples, but it was only in the remote-

ness of Iceland that any considerable quantity of this old pagan poetry escaped the destructive hostility of medieval Christianity. Here many earlier poems took on their final form; here the best of the surviving poems were actually composed; and here an intelligent interest in the earlier literature lasted on long enough into the Christian period to ensure the committing of many traditional works to writing. One precious manuscript collection, made in the thirteenth century, discovered at Skálholt, Iceland, in 1643, and now prized by the Royal Library at Copenhagen as the *Codex Regius* (R 2365), is the greatest literary monument of Germanic antiquity. The collection is sometimes called *The Poetic Edda* and its type of poetry "Eddic".

Twenty-nine poems make up the *Codex Regius*. Their themes are varied, but always of interest. Thus the *Hávamál* (see p. 19) is a rich storehouse of pagan Germanic wisdom expressed in terse proverbs analogous to those of the Old Testament. Humor is represented by such poems as *Thrymskvida* (see p. 24), one of the finest ballads in the world, in which the story of how Thor recovered his hammer from a giant is told with raciness and fine dramatic power. The *Atlakvida* or "Lay of Attila" (see p. 29) gives us the oldest and most vivid rendering of one episode in the German Nibelungen-cycle, and other poems develop other phases of the same tradition. And *Völuspá*, "The Seeress's Prophecy" (see p. 37), gives us the old Germanic version of the creation and final destruction of the world in a series of pictures more vivid and vast than those in any other literature.

Many other poems of the same period have reached us from other sources, *The Waking of Angantýr* (see p. 46), while not in the *Codex Regius*, is usually ascribed to one of the Eddic authors, the so-called *Helgi*-poet. In it we have a weirdness of atmosphere such as is rarely attained in

literature, the eerie horror of the haunted barrows by night, and with it the epic ideal of steadfast courage under all circumstances. The eerie becomes the ghastly in *The Lay of Darts* (see p. 52), a fragment dealing with the Clontarf disaster, which is imbedded in the prose of *Njáls Saga*. A blending of pagan imagination with Christian belief is found in *The Sun-Song* (see p. 54), a fragmentary northern precursor of the *Inferno* and *Paradiso* of Dante.

All of these poems belong metrically and imaginatively to a common tradition. The basis of the metre was a four-stressed line with a slight central pause, having at least two stressed syllables, one in each half-line, beginning with the same consonant or with a vowel. In the oldest verse there is no strict limit to the number of unaccented syllables; in the Eddic *Harbardsljóð* there are four-stressed lines running to as many as 20 syllables and some in *The Lay of Attila* range from 12 to 16. This is the oldest Teutonic metre and in Anglo-Saxon finds its purest expression in the lines of Cædmon. An early variant of this verse is "Song Measure" in which four-stressed lines alternate with three-stressed lines, with alliteration once more the element that holds the line together. This "four-three" metre is found hereafter in *Hávamál* and *The Sun-Song*.

Brevity of treatment is another striking feature of the Eddic poems. Greek epic poetry was stretched out into an *Iliad* or an *Odyssey*. Even in Anglo-Saxon *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* are on a much larger scale than anything in the Old Norse. The Scandinavian bards used a condensed, almost lyric type of utterance, flitting from peak to peak of a familiar narrative and leaving the intervening details for the memories or imaginations of the listeners. Many English ballads have this same characteristic but the resemblance ends there, for the Eddic poems are not

simple folk-poems but the self-conscious product of an elaborate and aristocratic tradition.

With lyric brevity went also lyric intensity. Concentration of expression goes hand in hand with concentration of experience. No poetry in the world is so charged with passion, so torn with the poignancy of briefly uttered tragedy. It may lack the amplitude and artistic proportion of the Greek epic; the mangled and fragmentary condition of the surviving texts enhances these deficiencies; but the Icelandic utterance has virtues of its own. It is instinct with human emotion focused to a burning point, rendered in the light of its highest significance.

Related to this fiery beauty is a quality of mystery that is deeply interfused, especially in the work of the *Helgi*-poet. Some critics would refer this to Celtic influences, to the effect upon Icelandic literature of the Irish who formed an important part of the island's population. Be that as it may, the atmosphere vaguely termed "Celtic" is nowhere more effectively expressed than in the uncanny horror of some of the Icelandic epics.

Common to this and all other Indo-European epics, moreover, is the ideal of courage, of calm-eyed fortitude while facing a clearly understood doom. The spirit with which Achilles toward the end of the *Iliad* looks unflinchingly toward his impending fate—because a man must uphold his manhood as dearer than his life—is the same spirit with which Hervor, in *The Waking of Angantýr*, insists upon securing the fatal sword, regardless of the tragedy which she must accept along with her duty. The epic age had thought its way through to a philosophy of life, and had found, as all true philosophers must, values in conduct which transcend the accidents of mortality. It was no facile doctrine of survival, solaced by saints or Peris, but a stern

acceptance of life, able to snatch victories of the spirit out of defeat.

The epic poetry survives in complete anonymity. It was followed, from the later tenth century to the twelfth, by a school of COURT POETRY, profoundly different in style and merit, and written by poets whose names and lives are known to us. Almost all of their poems were written in honour of kings and chieftains of the period, lauding the battles in which they took part or tearfully praising the valiant dead. The courts at which such panegyrics and encomia were composed were those of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, England, the Orkneys, and Ireland; but the more important of these "skalds" or court poets came almost invariably from Iceland, where the old poetic tradition had lingered longest.

The metres underwent a drastic change. The influence of the Latin hymns led Egil Skallagrímsson to introduce rhyming as well as alliteration (see p. 63 and also the fragment from Gunnlaug, p. 71); but the dominant "court metre," of the new school, was formed under Irish influence. Its unit was a stanza of four six-stressed lines. Each line was subdivided into two three-stressed half-lines; the first stressed syllable in the second half-line alliterated with any two of the stressed syllables in the first half-line; and this same first stressed syllable in the second half-line also *rhymed* with the last stressed syllable in the same half-line. (See, for example, Hallfred's *Lines on his conversion*, pp. 69-70.) It was from Irish poetry that the internal rhyming of the second half-line was borrowed, and it is significant that nearly all of the great Icelandic skalds showed signs of Irish blood. The number of unstressed syllables was rigidly limited and rarely if ever exceeded three to a hemistich. The most important variant of this six-stressed court metre is an eight-stressed line, known as "Hryn-henda" or "Flow-

metre," and is formed simply by adding an additional stressed measure to each half-line. (See Arnor Thorrods-son's lines, p. 81.)

The skalds developed another feature that is still more complicated and characteristic. This was the use of "ken-nings"—far-fetched metaphorical or descriptive equivalents for a direct name. They were men who instead of "calling a spade a spade" would term it variously as "the soil-cleaver, the discloser-of-fish-worms, the wooden-handled-one, the raiser-of-blisters" or the like. Actual instances are "breaker-of-giants'-heads" for "Thor"; "dew-of-sorrow" for "blood"; "bestower-of-rings" or "reddener-of-swords" for "prince"; and even "dock-steed's-quarter-moon's-gale-fire's-hurler" for "warrior." Nowhere else in world literature do we find conventions of diction so unusual. On the whole their drawbacks are greater than their advantages. They tend, of course, to build up an impression of glittering magnificence and thundering music, but they so hamper the flow of thought that a direct translation often gives little more than clotted nonsense.

To conceive of the equivalent of court verse in English, we should need to imagine heroic couplets on which had been superimposed the requirements of four alliterations and at least one Metaphysical "conceit" in every line. It is little wonder that the Icelandic court poetry, shackled by the punctilium of an arbitrary metre and weighed down by fantastic conventionalities of diction, rarely attained any freedom of movement and finally died of creeping paralysis. The marvel is rather that the verse of men like Sighvatur Thórdarson (see p. 73) and Hallfred ever achieves the triumphant power that it sometimes does. The real contribution of the period was, however, not in poetry at all, but in the great prose sagas, where the old heroic spirit

blends with a stark intellectuality of treatment that is of incomparable force.

With the dynastic degradations of twelfth-century Scandinavia and the extinction of Icelandic freedom in the thirteenth century, even the court poetry came to an end. The MIDDLE AGES are the real "Dark Ages" of Icelandic literature. Some religious verse of merit might be written, as by the monk Eysteinn Ásgrímsson and by Bishop Jón Arason. A learned individual like Loftur Guttormsson might praise his mistress in ninety varieties of stilted metre. Influences of Continental romance might give rise to the truly beautiful *Ballad of Tristram*. But taken as a whole, the period from 1200 to 1600 was conspicuously bleak and sterile.

A more promising MODERN PERIOD opened in the seventeenth century with the religious poetry of Einar Sigurdsson (1539-1626) and Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674). The former helped to counteract the invading doggerel of Reformation hymnody; the latter, a truly great poet by nature, challenges comparison with all other hymn-writers of the world by his fifty *Psalms of the Passion*. In these, intensity of religious emotion is matched with artistic skill to produce what many regard as the greatest single work in all Icelandic poetry. Hallgrímur's contemporary, Stefán Ólafsson (1620-1688) also manifested a complete mastery of metre in his excellent secular poetry.

The poets of the eighteenth century were men of learning rather than of inspiration. The erudite judges Páll Vídalín (1667-1727) and Benedikt Gröndal (1762-1825) and the priest, philologist, and horticulturist, Björn Halldórsson (1724-1794), left skilful verses as the by-products of industrious lives. More important was the Reverend Jón Thorláksson (1744-1819) who gave Iceland new windows

toward the outside world through his masterly translations from such poets as Pope, Milton and Klopstock.

This was the first flush of a new dawn. Day broke with the Romantic poets, Bjarni Thórarensen (1786-1841) and Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845), who returned from the University of Copenhagen on fire with the new poetic enthusiasm that was sweeping over Europe. As with Romantics everywhere, Bjarni turned back to the early literature of his own country for some of his inspiration, but he had intellectual qualities which kept this from being a sentimental fad. Strong as his emotions were, his masculine mind was stronger still and enabled him to recapture the stern intensity of the old tradition without falling into a slough of maudlin sensibility. His lyrics in the modern style, whether of love or of patriotism, were also of a very high order. It may indeed be claimed that at his best he is unsurpassed by any other Icelandic poet. His junior contemporary, Jónas Hallgrímsson, is a perfect complement to him—lacking his intellectual hardness and substituting for it a Keats-like sensitiveness to pure beauty. He not only wrote exquisite lyrics but did much in prose and verse to purify the language for the ends of literature.

In general, one may detect two main tendencies in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there has been an un-failing tradition of popular poetry, coming down unbroken from the *rímur* or alliterative ballads of the Middle Ages and persisting on in the work, narrative and lyric, of such unschooled poets as Hjalmar Jónsson (1796-1875), Sigurdur Breidfjörð (1798-1846), Páll Olafsson (1827-1905), Kristján Jónsson (1842-1869), Gudmundur Fridjónsson (born 1869), and Gudmundur Magnússon (1873-1918). On the other hand, there has been an even more striking tradition of scholarly poets who nourished their art by studying and translating the poetry of other countries, yet remained faith-

ful to the spirit of the native past. Among these academic poets, virtually all of whom were alumni of the University of Copenhagen, were Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791-1852), the translator of Homer; Grímur Thomsen (1820-1896), who favored the Greek lyric and tragic poets; Benedikt Gröndal Sveinbjarnarson (1826-1907), translator of the *Iliad*; Gisli Brynjúlfsson (1827-1888), who handled a dozen languages; Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831-1913), whose translations include part of Shakespeare and Byron; and Matthías Jochumsson (1835-1920) who also translated widely, from Shakespeare, Byron, Tegnér, and others. Matthías Jochumsson is generally regarded as Iceland's chief poet during the second half of the nineteenth century.

European realism, cultivated in Copenhagen by Georg Brandes and his circle, bore conspicuous fruit in the work of Gestur Pálsson (1852-1891), Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran (born 1859), and Thorsteinn Erlingsson (1858-1914). The best work of the first two was done in prose fiction, but Thorsteinn Erlingsson created a new epoch in Icelandic poetry by his militant Socialism and rationalism wedded to exquisitely wrought perfection of verse. No other individual has had so great an influence upon the work of the younger poets.

Two striking poets of Thorsteinn's generation were Stephan G. Stephansson (1853-1927) and Einar Benediktsson (born 1864). The former, who spent most of his life on the Canadian prairies, was a self-taught poet whose rugged verses bear the unmistakable marks of strong intellect and masculine genius. The latter, one of the most cultured and cosmopolitan of men, has had his residence abroad for many years and has made the whole world the province of his poetic administration. He is commonly regarded as the greatest living Icelandic poet.

The contemporary picture is a crowded one, and time must

elapse before the relative significance of the younger men assumes its true perspective. Special mention ought, however, to be given to Jakob Thórarensen (born 1886) and David Stefánsson (born 1895), as poets of unusual freshness and force.

Few nations can look back over a poetic record as long and as rich as that of Iceland. Epic, skaldic, medieval, Romantic, realistic, and eclectic phases of treatment have succeeded one another, and through them all there has persisted a distinctly Icelandic quality—a strict sense of form, a stern insistence on artistic correctness, together with an austerity of restraint that often gives a marmoreal hardness to what is one of the most musical of human tongues.

PART ONE
THE EPIC TRADITION

THE PROVERBS OF ODIN (*circa* 800-1100)

The oldest surviving fragments of Scandinavian poetry, preserved only in the thirteenth-century *Codex Regius*, are the *Hávamál* ("The High One's Words"), a collection of gnomic stanzas attributed to Odin (a Dawn Age Germanic hero ultimately deified) in the same vague way that the Hebrew proverbs are attributed to Solomon. Many of these Norse proverbs no doubt antedate the colonization of Iceland, but the collection took form in the island and was there finally committed to writing. Their note is entirely pagan, giving as they do the worldly wisdom of the Viking period. There are shrewd discriminations between the wise and the foolish, warnings for those who travel, tributes to the worth of loyal friendship, meditations on the importance of a good name and of unwavering courage. To these ancient sages, life is brief and death the end of all things worth while; yet for the fleeting span of human years there are abiding values in truth, fidelity, wisdom, and fortitude. The metre of the proverbs is "Song Measure," an alternation of four-stressed and three-stressed lines, based on alliteration. Only about one-fifth of the original collection is here given in translation.

Who wanders wide has need of wit,
Though a fool may flourish at home;
The wise will wink at a witless wight
As he sits in stupid silence.

The fool will gape when he comes to the feast;
He mutters or else is mute;
But as soon as he starts to swill you see
What the mind of the loon is like.

Herds know the time of their homeward way
And go from the grass at eve;
But a fool does not know when he's had his fill,
He marks not his belly's measure.

Happy is he who is hailed by men
With favor and fairest praises:
The hearts of others are hard to win,
Reluctant is their love.

Better baggage one cannot bear
On a wanderer's road than wisdom;
It is better than wealth on distant ways,
A shield for the shelterless sufferer.

Far is the road to a foeman's house
Though his home on thy highway be;
But prompt and straight is the path to a friend
Though he dwell on the distant hills.

One's home is best though it be but a hut;
There a man is a man indeed.
A pair of goats and a patched-up thatch
Far better be than begging.

Once I was young and went alone;
Then wandering, missed my way;
I felt myself rich when I found a friend,
For man is the solace of man.

Once for fun in the fields I fastened
My clothes on a scrawny scare-crow;
Dressed he seemed like a duke indeed,
But a naked man is naught.

The fir-tree dies in the dreary dell,
Its bark and its bast avail not;
And a man unloved is like that tree—
Why should he linger longer?

Brand from brand is kindled and burnt;
Fire is born of fire;
Man warms to man by word of mouth,
The voiceless is avoided.

The bitter pangs of the broken heart
None but the sufferer knows.
No woe is worse to the wise of heart
Than to lose all liking for life.

The goodliest gifts that man can gain
Are fire, the sight of the sun,
Health to hearten his earthly hope,
And a life of guileless living.

'Tis better to live than to lie in the mould;
No corpse can catch a cow;
The happy heir's hearth has little heat
For the ghost in the grave outside.

The halt rides a horse, the handless is herdsman,
The deaf man can fight like the devil,
A blind man is better than he that is burned,
The dead are dross and rubbish.

Better than none is a boy late-begot
And born when his father is buried;
Memorial-stones seldom stand by the highway
If reared not by son for sire.

Cattle perish, and kinsmen die,
And soon you die yourself;
But a noble name will never die,
'Tis a prize that never passes.

The fool may hope, by fleeing the fight,
To live for ever and ever;
But the aches and ails of age will come
Although the spears have spared him.

The wakeful fool will waste his night
Brooding upon his burdens;
By the morning watch he is worn with worry,
And burdens are just as bitter.

The man of malice, whose mind is warped,
Scoffs in scorn at all things;
He does not know what indeed he ought:
He is full of faults himself.

The son of a king should be silent and thoughtful,
And brave on the day of battle;
But every man should be merry and bold
Till the day of his death shall come.

Measure in wisdom is meet for man.
Beware of being too wise!
Happy in life he can hardly be
Whose knowledge is more than needful.

Glad at home and gay with his guests
Yet wise in his speech and wary
A man must be if the folk would mark
His words as deep and weighty;
A ninny, however, has naught to say—
He sits in the seat of the witless.

Mock not a man in matters of love,
Find no fault with lovers,
For fools may go free from the spell of the fair
Where the wise are won to worship.

Blame not another where all are bruised!—
Women are all men's weakness.
For love's great lure makes laughing-stocks
Of wise men by its wiles.

If thou hast a friend of the fullest trust,
Go thou and greet him often!
For grass and brambles soon overgrow
The trail that is seldom trod.

Be not the first to break with a friend
The faith that has bound you fast,
Care eats the heart that has no friend
To share its shrift of sorrow.

A SONG OF SAWS

Let no man trust in a creaking bow,
A burning fire, a croaking crow,
A gaping wolf or a rootless tree,
A grunting boar or a rising sea,
A bubbling kettle, a shaft that flies,
A falling billow or one night's ice,
An adder coiled or a bride's bed-word,
A playful bear or a broken sword,
The sons of kings or a half-burnt hall,
A sickening calf or a stubborn thrall,
A wheedling witch or a man just slain,
A mettled horse or a brother's bane.

THE BALLAD OF THRYM (*circa* 900)

One of the most famous of the Eddic poems narrates the manner in which Thor recovered his stolen hammer from the giant Thrym. This hammer, Mjollnir by name, was of peculiar power: he could make it as large or as small as he liked, and when he hurled it through the air it always found its mark and then returned of its own accord to his hand. As Thor is the thunder-god (with his hammer the lightning) and as the Giants represent the powers of cold and darkness, some scholars regard the theme of this racy tale as originating in that occasional phenomenon, a thunderstorm in winter. Loki, Thor's companion in adventure, is a puckish Mephistopheles in Icelandic mythology. In *Völuspá* (see p. 37) he darkens into a Lucifer; but here he is still only the ingenious god of mischief. Freyja (whose name persists in the English *Fri*-day) is the Venus of the Germanic Pantheon. So vigorous is the narrative, so full of enthusiasm and humor, that some have called the poem "The best ballad in the world".

Thor was wild when he awoke
For he missed his mighty hammer;
Shook his beard, and tossed his brow,
And felt about him in his fury.
This the speech that first he spoke:
"Hearken, Loki, hear an outrage
Yet unheard-of in earth or heaven;
Thieves have stolen Thor's great hammer."

They went to beauteous Freyja's bower.
This the speech that first he spoke:

"May I have your suit of feathers
As a help to find my hammer?"

Freyja speaks:

"I would give it, were it gold;
Grant it, even if 'twere silver."

Then Loki flew and the feather-suit whirred,
Till he left behind the home of the gods
And reached the distant realms of the giants.
On a mound sat Thrym, the giants' master,
Braiding halters of gold for his hounds
And trimming the heavy manes of his horses.

Thrym speaks:

"How do the gods fare? How do the elves fare?
Why come you alone to the land of the giants?"

Loki speaks:

"The gods fare ill. The elves fare ill.
Pray, have you hidden the Thunderer's hammer?"

Thrym speaks:

"Yes, I have hidden the Thunderer's hammer
Eight miles down in the depths of the earth.
No man shall bring it back to its place
Unless he fetches me Freyja as wife."

Then Loki flew and the feather-suit whirred,
Till he left behind the home of the giants
And reached the distant realms of the gods.
Thor it was greeted him at the gate:
"Have you tidings for all your toil?
Tell me now your news from the sky,
For he that sits often trips in his story,
And one lain down often deals in lies."

Loki speaks:

"Yes, I have tidings for all my toil.
The king of the giants is keeping your hammer,
And no man may bring it back to its place
Unless he fetches him Freyja as wife."

They went to beauteous Freyja's bower,
And this was the speech that first he spoke:
"Bind on, Freyja, your bridal-veil.
We two must ride to the realm of the giants."

Freyja was wroth and snorted with rage;
The hall of the gods was shaken greatly;
She burst the Necklace the dwarfs had braided:
"Sure I would look the most lustful of women
If I rode with you to the realms of the giants."

Then straightway the gods together met
And all the goddesses gathered in council;
The great ones plotted to find a plan
By which to get hold of the Thunderer's hammer.
Then up spake Heimdall, the whitest of gods,
Wise he was like the other Wanes:
"Let us bind on Thor the bridal-veil;
Let him bear the Necklace the dwarfs have braided;
Let house-keys rattle around his waist,
And petticoats billow about his knees;
Fasten brooches upon his breast,
And tie a bonnet about his brows."

But doughty Thor made haste to differ:
"Surely the gods would think me shamed
If I were bound with a bridal-veil!"

Then answered Loki, the son of Laufey:
"Tarry, and say not so, O Thor!"

For the giants will dwell in the gods' domain
Unless you have your hammer back."

Then they bound on Thor the bridal-veil;
And gave him the beads that the dwarfs had braided;
Let house-keys rattle around his waist,
And petticoats billow about his knees;
Fastened brooches upon his breast
And tied a bonnet about his brows.

Then up spoke Loki, the son of Laufey:
"I will go in a bridesmaid's guise;
We two shall ride to the realms of the giants."

Then goats were brought with the greatest speed
And hitched to the shafts for a hasty journey.
The rocks were rent and the hot earth reeked
In Thor's mad ride to the giants' realm.

Then muttered Thrym, the giants' master:
"Stand up, giants, and strew the benches!
They bring me Freyja to be my wife,
The daughter of Njord from Noatun.
I keep in my stables gold-horned kine
And jet-black oxen, the joy of giants;
Gems are mine, and treasured jewels;
I lack for nothing but Freyja's love."

Early that evening the bride-guests entered.
Ale was brought of the giants' brew.
Thor swallowed an ox and several salmon;
Ate all the sweets set aside for the women;
And then guzzled down three casks of grog.

Then muttered Thrym, the giants' master:
"Who ever saw bride that bit so boldly!
I never saw bride with a broader bite
Or a maid that drank so deeply of mead!"

The wily bridesmaid was sitting by,
And found response to the giant's speech :
"Freyja for eight long days has fasted,
Yearning to lie in the land of the giants."

Then he peered 'neath the veil, for he panted for kisses ;
But backwards he lurched the length of the hall :
"Why are Freyja's eyes so fearful,
For they flash with flames of burning fire?"

Then the wily bridesmaid, sitting by,
Found response to the giant's speech :
"For eight long nights she has slumbered not,
Through yearning to lie in the land of the giants."

In came the giant's aged sister,
Begging bold for a bridal-fee :
"Take off your rings of reddest gold
If you would win my willing love."

Then muttered Thrym, the giants' master :
"Bring me the hammer to hallow the bride !
Let Mjollnir lie on the maiden's knee
That Vor may bless our marriage vows."

Thor's heart bounded in his bosom
As he held his iron hammer.
First he maced the giants' master ;
Then he crushed his crew of fellows,
Smashed the giants to a jelly,
Slew the giant's aged sister
Who had begged a fee of bridal ;
Gave her "pounds" instead of pennies,
Hammer-strokes instead of bracelets.

Thus did Thor regain his thunder.

THE LAY OF ATTILA (*circa* 950 A.D.)

Many of the Eddic poems deal with themes which originated outside of Scandinavia proper, among the tribes of South Germany. *The Lay of Attila* gives us a modified blending of two of these themes. In the year 437, Gundicarius (Gunnar), king of the Burgundians then dominant in the Rhine district, was slain by the Huns, together with his army. In 453, Attila, king of the Huns, was murdered in bed by his wife. These historical events, colored and modified by tradition and imagination, are woven together in Germanic and Scandinavian poetry to give us such versions of "The Fall of the Nibelungs" as that which follows. This is, it should be remembered, only one episode in a much wider cycle of legend, the fullest treatment of which is to be found in the operas of Richard Wagner.

In *The Lay of Attila*, Gunnar and Hogni, the sons of Gjuki, are treacherously invited to a festival by Attila, who greedily seeks to slay them and obtain their fabulous hoard of gold. Before setting out they hide their treasure in the Rhine in a spot which only they two know. They are made captive by Attila and separated. Gunnar refused to disclose the hiding-place of the treasure until the heart of Hogni was brought to him. When he was thus assured that he alone knew the secret, he defied Attila and was cast with his arms bound into a serpent-pit in the forest. Here he played a harp with his toes so sweetly that all of the snakes except one fell into a doze. That one, however, gnawed through his ribs and struck its fangs into his heart. Gudrun, sister of Gunnar and wife of Attila, then took a terrible revenge. She killed the two little sons she had borne to Attila, cooked their hearts, and gave them to Attila and his men to eat. That same night she stabbed Attila in bed and set fire to the hall, burning all who were within it.

In spite of faulty transmission, this is one of the best of the Eddic poems. The poet has dramatic power, an epic sense of dignity and sweep, rich diction, and the capacity to portray the main characters with a few unforgettable strokes. Authorities differ widely as to place of origin, but Iceland in the tenth century fits the requirements fairly well.

I. THE INVITATION

Attila sent in the olden days
A warrior keen whose name was Knefred,
Bearing a message of bale and malice
To the court of Gjuki, the hall of Gunnar,
With benches broad and beer of the best.
The henchmen drank in the mighty hall;
The strangers in fear their words restrained
Till the Southern envoy with evil voice
Cried aloud from his lofty seat:

“Attila sends me to bear his errand,
On bridled steed through the Black Wood riding,
Bidding you, Gunnar, as guest to his benches,
In ring-dight helmet to visit his halls.
Shaven shafts and shields you may choose there,
Gold-hued helmets and Hunnish maidens,
Silver-gilt saddle-cloths, scarlet sarks,
Lances and spears and bit-champing steeds.
He will give you the ground of Gnita-heath,
Ringing shafts and shining shields,
Treasure huge and the halls of Danp,
And the mighty forest that men call Mirkwood.”

His head turned Gunnar, to Hogni he spoke:
“What counsel, young hero, when this we hear?
I know of no gold on the heath of Gnita

So much that we cannot match it again.
Seven store-rooms are stacked with our swords,
And the hilt of each is heavy with gold.
My steed is the best, my brand is the sharpest,
My bows grace the benches, my byrnies are golden,
My helm is the fairest from halls of King Kjar,
My harness excels all that Hunland can boast of."

Hogni made answer: "What augurs, bethink you,
This ring that our sister has sent wrapt in wolf-hair?
I feel that she meant it a message of warning:
This hair of the heath-beast she hid in the ring
Must hint that our way will be wolfish and wan."

Comrades and counsellors, kindred and neighbours,
Wise men and warriors willed not his going.

Gunnar, however, gallantly, scornfully
Spoke like a king in his court at the banquet:
"Come now, my cup-bearer, carry our goblets!
Hand to the heroes the golden cups hither!
Aged grey wolves shall be wardens to watch o'er
The gold of the Niflungs if Gunnar shall perish.
Black-coated bears shall bite it and rend it,
Greedily gnaw it if Gunnar return not."

Faithful the folk said farewell to their masters,
Leading their lords from the lair of the Niflungs.
Hogni's son lisped to them, loudly though little:
"Fortune befriend you wherever you fare!"

The heroes made haste over highland and lowland,
Chargers bit-champing crossed cheerless Black Forest.
Hunland was shaken as haughty kings galloped;
Whip-fearing horses sped hard through the heather.

II. THE MURDER

Presently they reached the palace
Where the wise one sipped the wine-cup.
Wardens sat without it watching,
Set to guard the gate if Gunnar
Sought a siege with sword and spear-shaft.

There their sister spoke in her sorrow,
As her brothers twain made bold to enter :
"Betrayed art thou, Gunnar ! What guard hast thou now
From the wiles of the Huns ? Ah, make haste from the hall !
'Twere better, my brother, to come in thy byrnie,
With helmeted household to halls of the Hun-king ;
To sit in the saddle all day in the sunshine
While Norns make dirge for the noble dead
And Hunnish shield-maids know the harrow,
Set the prince of the Huns in the serpent-pit—
But now that den has been dug for thee."

Then answered Gunnar, the gallant Niflung :
"Too late is it, sister, to summon my swordsmen,
Far are my followers, fearless in fight,
Resting at home mid the rocks of the Rhineland."

Men gripped at Gunnar, the gallant Burgundian,
Bound the brave one with bonds of iron.
Hogni slew seven with sword-edge keen,
And flung an eighth in the fire of the hearth.
The valiant should fight with their foemen thus
As Hogni hewed in Gunnar's behalf.

They asked the king if he cared to buy
His life with gold, that prince of the Goths.
Then answered Gunnar, the great and gallant :

"Hogni's heart in my hand must lie,
Carved with a knife that keenest cuts
And brought from the breast of my brother brave."

(They thought to beguile the gallant king,
And cut the throat of a thriftless thrall,)
Hewed out the heart of haggard Hjalli;
On a bloody platter they brought it to Gunnar.
Then answered Gunnar, the great and gallant:
"This is the heart of the coward Hjalli,
Wholly unlike the heart of Hogni.
This one shakes still as it stands on the platter,
But twice as much in his timid breast."

Hogni laughed as they carved him alive;
He shed no tears as they tore out his heart.
On a bloody platter they bore it to Gunnar.
Then answered Gunnar, the glorious Niflung:
"This is the heart of the hero Hogni,
Wholly unlike the heart of Hjalli.
Little it quakes as it lies on the platter,
But it trembled less when it lay in his breast.
May thy luck be less, thou lord of the Huns,
Than thy share of the gold that is gone forever!
To none but me is the secret known
Of the Niflungs' hoard since Hogni died.
I had mistrust while we twain did breathe;
Now I live alone and fear no longer.
The Rhine shall rather that red gold hide,
The stream of the gods our strife-born treasure;
Our rings shall gleam in the rolling river
And not on the hands of the Hunnish host."

The king of the Huns cried out to his men:
"Bring me the waggon for here he is bound!"

The king rode Glaum, his goodly steed;
About him were shields and shining swords;
But Gudrun, sprung from the gods of slaughter,
Talked without tears in the hall of tumult:
"May it go with thee, husband, as Gunnar thou promised,
Swearing with oaths given often of old,
By the sun in the south and the steep rock of Odin,
The joists of thy bed and the jewels of Wuldor!"

In the loathsome pit alive with serpents
Living they laid the lordly monarch.
But Gunnar, dying in grim defiance,
Smote the harp with a heart unyielding.
High rang the death-song. So should a hero
Guard his gold from the foes against him.

III. GUDRUN'S REVENGE

Attila rode on his rampant steed,
Making for home from the place of murder.
Crowded with horses, the courtyard clanged;
Arms clashed loud as they came from the heath.
Out came Gudrun to greet her husband,
Gave the monarch a golden goblet:
"Thou may'st have, my lord, in thy hall to feast on,
Tender beasts I have boldly slaughtered."

Attila's ale-cups echoed, brimming,
When the Hunnish heroes to hall came happy;
Bearded warriors thronged the benches
(Those who had murdered brave Gunnar in Mirkwood).
Then the bright-faced lady bore them fiercely
Wine and meat in dainty morsels,
Shared the dish of shame amongst them.

Then in spite she spake to Attila :

“The hearts of thy sons, thou giver of swords,
Thou hast eaten with honey, all heavy with blood!
Stern one, the flesh of thy stock thou must stomach,
Flesh thou hast shared with thy friends in the hall.
Never again shalt thou call to thy knees
Eitel and Erp when merry with ale,
Nor shalt thou see thy sons on their seats,
Shaping their shafts, bold sharers of gold,
Clipping manes or spurring mares.”

Babble broke from the blear-eyed benches,
Well-clad warriors wailed in anger,
Only Gudrun grieved not loudly
For her bear-fierce brothers, her boys so tender,
The innocent babes she had borne to the Hun-king.

The swan-white lady sowed snares of gold,
Enriched the servants with ruddy bracelets,
Heaping up doom with hoards of wealth,
Looting the temple of treasure of death.
Merry was Attila, mad with drinking,
Weaponless, witless, unwary of Gudrun.
Often their play in the hall of princes
Better had been in its blithe embracing.

With the sword she gave blood to her bed to drink;
Murdered her lord; then loosed the hounds,
Freed the slaves and fired the hall,
Burning the host and avenging her brothers.
All of their murderers met with their death there;
Old timbers tumbled; temples were wasted,
The Buthlungs' shelter; while shield-maids perished,
Bereft of life in the raging fire.

The tale is told. In such terms of terror
No other bride will avenge her brothers.
Before the death of that fairest lady,
Three princes died by her deadly hand.

THE NORSE APOCALYPSE (*circa* 950 A.D.)

The finest spiritual achievement of Norse paganism is *Völuspá* or *The Sibyl's Prophecy*, a vivid poem setting forth both the cosmogony and the eschatology of the North, the *Genesis* and *Revelation* of Germanic heathendom. The general weight of evidence places its composition in Iceland about the middle of the tenth century. The author is unknown.

In the first part of the poem, which deals with the past, the divine Seeress is seated on her Sibylline throne in the midst of the assembly of the gods. In the second part, which discloses the final destruction of the universe and the gods, she is being anxiously consulted in private by Odin. A third part (perhaps touched by Irish Christian influence) foretells a millennial return of a golden age, and describes the due-portion of the just and the wicked.

The poet takes for granted such a familiarity with Norse mythology as could be rendered only by notes exceeding the poem itself several times in length. Certain of the major points should, however, be briefly made plain: *Odin* appears here as the chief of the gods, pre-eminent for wisdom, who has, with the help of his two brothers, created the earth and mankind. His wife is *Frigga*, and among his many sons are *Thor* (the god of thunder), *Balder* (the god of innocence and piety), *Vidar* (Odin's avenger), *Heimdall* (the watchman of the gods), and *Hod* (the blind slayer of *Balder*). *Odin*, in a Promethean search for wisdom, had at one time given one of his eyes in pawn to the Giant *Mimir* in exchange for a drink from the Well of Wisdom; and hence he is usually represented as one-eyed. *Nine worlds* composed the Norse universe: (1) *Asgard*, the home of the great gods; (2) *Vanaheim*, the home of the *Wanes*,

another race of gods; (3) Jotunheim, the land of the giants; (4) Midgard, the world of men; (5) Alfheim, the land of elves; (6) Svartalfaheim, the home of dark elves; (7) Nidavellir, land of the dwarfs; (8) Niflheim, the world of the dead, a sort of hell lying in the frigid north; and (9) Muspellsheim, the land of fire, another sort of hell lying in the torrid south. *Yggdrasil*, the tree of the universe, had its trunk and branches in Asgard, but it had three roots in Niflheim, Jotunheim, and Asgard respectively, and by these roots were three wells, Vergelmir, Mimir's Well, and the Well of the Norns. Beside Vergelmir, a fearful serpent, Nidhogg, gnawed at the tree's root and threatened its life. The first section of the poem ends with references to the early wars of the gods.

The catastrophic events of Part II begin with the slaying of Balder through the evil contrivance of Loki, who is bound in torment for his offence. After a series of disasters suffered by the gods, the dark forces of the universe begin to rally against them and both sides marshal their hosts. Cocks in Jotunheim, Niflheim, and Asgard crow to awaken the combatants. Evil warfare in the world of men is a prelude to the cosmic conflict. The worlds of fire, of giants, and of the dead come swarming to assault the battlements of heaven. Odin is slain by the great wolf Fenrir but is avenged by Vidar. Thor kills the great Dragon or Earth-serpent, but is himself fatally poisoned by its breath. The forces of heaven are put to rout and the universe sinks in consuming fire.

Part III, as already indicated, foretells "a new heaven and a new earth," in which peace and justice rule once more. Some of the gods appear to have survived the cataclysm, and proceed to live their lives anew.

I. GENESIS

I pray all holy gods of heaven,
The high and low of men to hear me.
Odin asks me to tell in order

The annals of men that I remember.
I call to mind the mighty Giants
Who bred me up in the days gone by.
Nine worlds I knew, and a wondrous tree
That knit the nine with its noble roots.

Before the worlds when nothing was,
Nor sand nor sea nor icy surf,
No earth was here nor heaven above;
No gracious grass, but a yawning Gulf
Ere the sons of Bor made the blessed earth,
Raised up the level land before us.
Then the sun from the south shone on dwelling-stones
And the fields were green with the growing herbs.
The mighty sun and the moon her mate
Cast their hands on the rim of heaven.
She knew not her home nor the moon his hall,
Nor the stars the place that they had to stay.

Then sought the Powers their judgment-seats;
The most high gods took counsel together;
Naming night and the new-born moon,
Naming morning and midday too,
Noon-day and evening to number the seasons.
The great gods pressed to the plains of Ida,
Temples and fanes they timbered high,
Fixing forges and fashioning treasures,
Shaping tongs and modelling tools.
In the court with cheer they played at chess;
The gods knew never the lack of gold
Till three grim Sibyls sought their side,
Loathsome maids from the land of Giants.

Then sought the Powers their judgment-seats,
The most high gods took counsel together,

Who should fashion the elfin folk
From the bloody surf and the giants' bones.
Then out of the earth in the image of man
They moulded the dwarfs as Durinn bade them.

Then out of the host of that heavenly home
There came three gods, all great and gracious,
Who found on the earth without life or future
The first of men and the first of maidens.
Their breasts were void of the breath of life;
Speech they lacked and the gift of spirit,
Quickened senses and comely color.
Then Odin gave soul, and Hönir sense,
And Lodur speech and the flush of life.

I know an ash called Yggdrasil,
High and holy and white with loam;
Thence come the dews that drench the dales,
Green it spreads o'er the spring of the Norns.
There three maidens, mighty in wisdom,
Weave by the well of the weeping tree;
They have fashioned the fate and formed the life
And chosen the wierds of the children of men.

A war in the world I well remember,
The first of the wars of the gods and Wanes,
When Gollveig was hacked in Odin's hall:
Thrice she was burned and thrice reborn,
Over and over, yet ever she lives.

Then sought the Powers their judgment-seats,
The most high gods took counsel together,
Whether to yield to a tribute-yoke
Or plan a league with a hostage-pledge.

Odin then hurled with his spear at the host :
First this was of the wars of the world.
The battlements of the gods were breached ;
The Waners on the march made clamor of war.

Then sought the Powers their judgment-seats,
The most high gods took counsel together,
To find the foe who had fouled the heavens
And had given Freyja to giant-foemen.
Thor then raged with unmeasured wrath,
Seldom he sits when the news is sour.
Oaths were shaken and faith was shattered
And mighty leagues were laid in the dust.

II. GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG

When she came to a house, they called her Heid,
The cunning Sibyl, the sorceress ;
The wicked witch knew wiles of magic ;
The hag was a joy to the heart of Hell.
The Father of Gods gave her finest rings,
And runes for treasure and rods for divining.
Her eye saw wide through all the worlds,
She saw the valkyries cross the heavens,
Ready to ride to the ranks of the gods.

She was sitting alone when aged Odin
Came and gazed in the grey of her eyes :
“What do you seek ? And why come here ?
Odin, I know where you hid your eye
In the holy waters of Mimir’s well.
Every morn from your mighty pledge
Mimir drinks mead. Would you learn still more ?

I know the horn of Heimdall hidden
Under the trunk of the holy tree.

I see a river that rushes in rapids
O'er the pledge you laid. Would you learn still more?

I see dark fate for the son of Odin,
Blessed Balder, the bloody victim.
Slender and soft the Mistletoe stands,
Growing on high above the ground.
From that delicate shoot there shall come a shaft,
Hateful and harmful, and Hod shall hurl it.
But Frigga sobs in the halls of the sea
For the loss of the gods. Would you learn still more?

I see One bound in the black abyss
Like in body to guileful Loki.
There Sigyn sits in sorrow of heart
Beside her lord. Would you learn still more?

Far to the east in the Iron Wood
An ogress is breeding the brood of Fenrir,
And from that litter a Wolf shall leap
And rend the moon from the ring of heaven;
He shall feed on the corpses of fated men,
And spatter the skies with their scarlet gore.
The sun shall grow dark and no summer shall follow;
All winds shall mar. Would you learn still more?

There sat on a hillock and smote his harp
Joyous Eggther, the giants' shepherd.
A crimson cock in the goose-wood crowed,
Fjalar the fierce called the foe to fight.
Then the Gold-combed Cock crowed loud to the gods,
Waking the heroes in Odin's hall.
And another cock in the nether gloom
Hails the lords of the halls of Hell.

*The hell-hound howls by the Hole of the pit;
The fetters shall snap, and the Wolf range free.*

Many a tale my foresight could tell
Of the bloody Doom of the blessed gods.
Brothers shall fight and butcher brother;
Kinsmen shall break the bonds of kind;
Woe to the world with wolves and whores
In an age of axes, an epoch of swords,
A time of tempests and tattered shields,
Ere the world shall die in the dust of death!
Mimir's sons move, and the Maker himself
Stirs at the hail of the horn of doom.
Loud blows Heimdall; the horn is on high;
Odin communes with the head of Mimir;
The ancient Ash of Earth is shaken;
Its limbs groan loud, for the giants are loose.

*The hell-hound howls by the Hole of the pit;
The fetters shall snap, and the Wolf range free.*

How fare the gods now? How fare the elves now?
Giant-land groans, and the gods are at council.
Sorely the dwarfs who dwell in the rocks
Moan by their doors. Would you learn still more?

From the east rides Hrym with his shield held high;
The Serpent writhes in colossal wrath;
It lashes the sea; the eagle screams,
And rends the dead, while the Doom-ship drives.
A bark from the west bears the World-destroyers,
Launched on the sea with Loki for steersman.
The host of demons make haste with the Wolf,
Bringing among them the brother of Byleist.
Surt from the south bears a sword of fire;
The Death-devil's sabre shines like the sun:
The summits are rending, the valleys are sinking,
The hell-hosts are marching, the heavens are falling.

*The hell-hound howls by the Hole of the pit;
The fetters shall snap, and the Wolf range free.*

A second woe has the High One's wife
When Odin goes forth to fight with the Wolf,
And Beli's bright slayer makes battle with Surt.
The darling of Frigga must die in that place.
Then his stalwart son assails the beast,
Vidar goes forth to fight with the Wolf.
Thrusting his sword down its dripping throat,
He stabs its heart and avenges his sire.
Then glorious Thor to battle goes,
Seeking the death of the Dragon of old.
He slays that Serpent in sacred strength,
But feels the blight of its venomous breath,
Falters nine paces, and falls for ever.
Then swarms of hell sweep over the earth:
The sun goes out, earth sinks in the gulf,
The stars are blotted from out the sky,
And the furious flames in frenzy flare
Till high they leap about heaven itself.

III. A MILLENNIAL EPILOGUE

I see Earth grow from the gulf again
With gracious glades of living green.
By the headlong falls the eagle hovers
And swoops for fish in the seething flood.
The great gods meet in the meads of Ida;
Of the terrible Serpent of old they talk;
They all remember the mighty past
And the ancient runes of the ruler of gods.
There they shall find in the fragrant fields
Chessmen of gold in the summer grass,

Owned by the gods in the days of old,
Golden yellow from years of yore.
Fields unsown shall bring harvests forth;
All troubles shall cease, and Balder return;
Balder and Hod in Odin's hall
Shall live with the gods. Would you learn still more?

Hönnir shall wield the wizard's wand,
And the sons of the brothers of Odin abide
In the lair of the winds. Would you learn still more?

I see a hall on the heath of heaven,
Shingled with gold as the sun for glory:
There the righteous rest in the rarest bliss,
And live for ever in endless joy.

Far from the sun on the strand of Death
I see a dwelling with doors to the north.
Venom drips through the chimney-vent
For its roof is thatched with writhing adders.
The River of Fear through the foul dale flows
Whose deadly waters are daggers and swords;
Through the savage waves of that stream must wade
The slayer of folk and the faithless friend;
While the serpent is sucking the blood of the slain
And the wolf is cramming on carrion-clay.

Hither draws near the Dragon of Darkness,
Winging his way from the Wolds of the Night,
Flying o'er earth with pinions of fire,
Laden with slain. But now I must sink!

THE SWORD OF ANGANTÝR (*ca.* 1000 A.D.)

This poem is one episode in the tragic history of the sword Tyrfing, on which the dwarfs who forged it laid the curse that (1) it should bring death to its bearer, (2) that all wounds by it should be fatal, and (3) that three deeds of shame should be wrought by it. Its first owner, Svafrlami, was slain by Arngrím, who took the sword. Arngrím left it to his son Angantýr, who, with his eleven brothers, led a viking life. The twelve were tragically slain in the island of Samsey by Hjálmar and Odd, but Hjálmar died of the wounds of Tyrfing. Angantýr had a posthumous daughter, Hervor, who was brought up as a bondmaid, in ignorance of her lineage. When she learns the truth, the old fighting spirit of her family comes upon her, and she goes in armor to the lonely island of Samsey to demand the sword from the ghosts at the funeral-barrow. In spite of all terrors, and of her father's reluctance to pass on the curse, her resolution prevails and she gets the sword. The poem deals with this bold expedition of Hervor.

In Samsey isle at set of sun
A shepherd met a mail-clad maid.

Shepherd: "Who comes alone to this lonely isle?
Begone, for the night makes lodging needful!"

Hervor: "I shall not seek for shelter to-night
For none of the folk in the isle do I know.
But tell me, pray, before you depart,
Where are the howes called Hjorvard's Howes?"

Shepherd: "Ask me not that! You are not wise!
O vikings' friend, 'tis a fearful place!
Let us run as fast as our feet can go,
For all that spot is an awesome sight."

Hervor: "I shall give you a ring if you guide me there.
A friend of heroes, I hold not back."

Shepherd: "No gems nor fair rings that man could render
May ward my feet from their homeward way.
Foolish I hold him that hither would come
Walking alone in the livid night:
For fires are gliding and grave-mounds are
 gaping,
Field and fen flaring! Oh, fast let us run!"

Hervor: "Let us not fear at such flickering flames,
Though all of the isle be edged with fire.
The ghosts of the dead must not daunt us thus.
Converse I crave with the cromlech's corpses."

Then the shepherd fled to his forest-hut,
Away from the voice of the valiant maid;
But Hervor's hard-knit heart rose higher
Within her breast in that baleful hour.

Hervor *(She has gone to where the flames blaze about
 the barrows at "Hjorvard's Howes," and
 there calls upon her father, Angantýr, and
 his brethren.):*

"Awake, Angantýr! I, the girl
That Tófa bore thee, bid thee rise!
Give from the grave the gashing sword
The Small Men forged for Svafrlami.

Hervard, Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantýr!
I bid you rise from the roots of the trees
With helm and hauberk and hacking sword
And riven shield and reddened spear!"

(No response.)

"Sure ye are earth, ye sons of Arngrím;
Your fiery spirits are spent and ended,
Dwindled at last to heaps of dust,
Since none of Eyfura's sons will answer
Nor speak to me here in Munar Haven.
Hervard, Hjorvard, Hrani, Angantýr!
May your ribs be cursed with restless pain
As if you lay in a lair of ants
Unless you give me the glaive of Dwale!
Shame on the shades that would shroud the
sword!"

Angantýr (speaking from the funeral-barrow):

"Hervor, my daughter, why dost thou hail us
With words of cursing? Sure thou art crazed.
Thou art walking to-night a way of doom.
Thou art wild of wit and bewildered of mind,
Calling the dead from their place in the dust.
Maid so young, thou dost not seem mortal
Who roamest about the barrows at night,
And with graven spear and Gothic metal,
Shining helmet and hauberk of chain-mail,
Darest to face the door of the death-mound."

Hervor: "Human they held me until I came hither,
Seeking your dwelling so deep in the dust.
Give me the sword that the dwarfs once
smithied.
From the howe give it forth, for thou canst not
hide it!"

Angantýr: "No father nor son consigned me here,
Nor friendly kin, but my fatal foes.
Two of them lived as the gainers of Tyrfinn
But only one was the owner at last."

Hervor: "Tell me the truth! For I trust that Thor
Will grant thee no peace in thy place of rest
If thou hast the sword and wilt not cede it.
Thou art loath to leave thy lass her rights."

Angantýr: "The hell-gates gape, and the graves are open;
And look, the isle is alive with flame.
The sight of these wastes is fearful to see.
Make haste to thy ships while thou hast the
time!"

Hervor: "No beacon of bale canst thou burn by night
That would fright my heart with its grisly flame.
Thy daughter's bosom will never dread
Though she see a ghost at the door of the
grave. . . .

And now, all ye dead, I doom you with spells
To rot and moulder among the shades.
Give me, Angantýr, from out the grave,
The hauberk-hacking slayer of Hjálmar!"

Angantýr: "The weapon sharp lies beneath my shoulders,
Folded about with flames of fire;
I know no woman in all the world
Would venture to hold that blade in her hands."

Hervor: "'Tis I will seize that keen-edged sword,
And hold it fast, if my hands may have it.
I have no fear of the burning fire;
The flames are sinking before my sight."

Angantýr: "Foolish, my Hervor, thou art to fling
Thyself, clear-eyed, in the seething fire!
Rather, the sword I render to thee,
Sternest of maids, for I cannot withstand thee."
(He hands out the sword, and Hervor takes it.)

Hervor: "Valiantly dost thou, O son of the vikings,
Give me the sword from out of the grave.
Happier am I, O hero, to hold it
Than if I had conquered the kingdom of
Norway."

Angantýr: "Little thou knowest, my lass, what thou sayest!
Fated thy words, thou most foolish of women!
Tyrfing, this sword, as I tell thee in truth,
Will work out the doom and the death of thy
race.

A son thou shalt bear who will carry the sword,
Doughty in strength in the days that will come.
Heidrek, his name, shall be known among men,
Greater than all 'neath the tent of the sun."

Hervor: "Now I must go to my galleys again.
Kindled in heart is thy daughter, O king!
Little I care, how in years that will come
Quarrels will rise and ruth for my children."

Angantýr: "Long shalt thou own it and live to enjoy it;
But keep it sheathed, this killer of Hjálmar.
Touch not its edge, it is tainted with poison.
This waster of men is far worse than a plague.
Farewell, my daughter! Full fain would I lend
thee
The lives of the twelve of us lying here now,—
All of the strength and the soul that perished,
Lost when the heirs of Arngrím died."

Hervor: "Hail, all ye ghosts that dwell in the grave-
mound!

Now I am hungry to hasten away."

*(To herself, as she turns away, and the fires
sink, and darkness falls again:)*

"Surely I lived between Life and Death
While all of the bale-fires burned here about
me!"

THE LAY OF DARTS (ca. 1015 A.D.)

In the atmosphere with which Shakespeare began his *Macbeth* six centuries later, this more ancient poet imagines certain "weird sisters" or Valkyries as weaving a web of doom before the battle of Clontarf (1014), in which the Irish overthrew the Danes and Norsemen, yet lost their own leader, King Brian. Earl Sigurd of Orkney, the Norse leader, also fell. The poem contains a spell to preserve the life of the young Norse king, Sigtrygg Silkbeard of Dublin, who indeed survived the battle. The poet is apparently an Iclander who fought at Clontarf. His verses were preserved in a fragmentary state in one of the Icelandic sagas. Thomas Gray's *The Fatal Sisters* is a free adaptation in rhyming stanzas of this old alliterative poem.

Wide spreads the warp of the slaughter of war,
Clouds form the beam, and they drizzle with blood;
Grey is the web of the grim host of lances;
Fast friends of Odin, we fill out the fabric—
Weaving the web with a weft that is red.
The web is warped with warriors' entrails,
Heavily weighted with heads of the slain;
The stays are of iron; spears crimson-stained
Serve as the shafts; they are shuttled with arrows.
Let us wield our swords at this web of war!
Swipple and Sword-lass, Sangrid and War-maid,
Weave at the web with their weapons drawn bright.
The spear-shaft shall sing, and the shield-rim shall ring,
And the helm-hound shall hack at the targes.

Wind, Oh wind the web of darts!
Then ride to succor young Sigtrygg in fight!
Gunnr and Gondol who guard the prince
Shall bathe their shields in the blood of men.

Wind, Oh wind the web of darts!
Frame the fate of friend and foe!
Then rush to the ranks of reeling war,
Where our friends are crossing crimson swords!

Wind, Oh wind the web of darts!
Warriors' standards there are streaming.
Let us look to Sigtrygg's life;
Valkyries can trust to control the battle.

The Norse who dwelt on the distant verge
Shall lord it over the land of Erin.
Death is doomed for a doughty king,
And an earl shall perish at point of spear.
The Irish shall suffer a sorrow so great
It shall ne'er be lost from the lips of men.
News of the Norse shall spread night o'er the land.

The web is woven, the wolds are reddened,
Horror is hanging on high in the heavens,
Gory clouds gather in grisly forewarning,
Mists shall be murky with life-blood of men.

Songs such as seeresses sing for men's saving,
Spells we have spoken to spare the young chieftain,
Victory-songs and the spells of the spear-fight,—
Let him who has heard them rehearse them to men.

Now let us hasten on halterless horses,
Far, far away with our weapons unsheathed!

THE ARCTIC DANTE (ca. 1050 A.D.)

In the early Middle Ages many poets essayed that visionary portrayal of the hereafter in which Dante finally eclipsed all others. The present poem, known usually as *The Sun-Song*, is one of these forerunners of the *Divina Commedia*. In it, the spirit of a dead father is speaking to his son in a vision of the night. In the first section, he tells of his death, and how the corpse-bound soul lay for a night before its final release. Then, after nine days in the Chair of the Norns, he passes to Hell. The second section discloses ten of the torments of Hell; and the third section some six of the joys of Heaven. The vision ends with a prayer and a parting conversation between father and son. *The Sun-Song* was not rediscovered until the seventeenth century but its accurate use of the old Song Measure would seem to indicate an origin as far back as the eleventh century. This would also agree very well with the marked pagan elements in an otherwise Christian poem.

I. DEATH

I begin to rehearse how happy I was
Upon this Earth of Pleasure,
And next how the sons of men must sink
To the grave against their will.
Folly and pride deceive the folk
Who set their souls on riches.
The glitter of gold turns to grief at last.
Wealth has brought woe to many.
Happy I seemed in a hundred ways

For little I looked before me,
Surely the Lord has shaped our Earth
Filled to the full with delight.

I sat long and brooded, bowed and bent;
Wild was my wish to live;
But He, the Mightier, had his will.
The race of the doomed was run.
The cords of Hell pressed hard and fast
About my sickening sides.
I tried to break them but tugged in vain;
My limbs were no longer light.
No person else knew the piercing pangs
That smote me from every side.
The Maids of Hell were calling me home,
Every evening they called me.

I saw the Sun, the Star of Day,
Sink in a world of storm;
While across the gulf I heard the gates
Of Hell clang heavily.
I saw the Sun inscribed with blood
(My ghost was almost gone),
More did he seem in majesty
Than ever on earth before.
I saw the Sun, it seemed that I gazed
On the glory of God himself.
Low I bowed for the last, mute time
In the world of mortal men.
I saw the Sun, it dazzled my sight,
And I fell in a faint to the ground.
Across the abyss roared boiling streams
Darkly dyed with blood.
I saw the Sun with eyes that swayed,
Faltering, full of dread;

The heart in my breast no longer beat
But melted to murky clots.
I saw the Sun, my sorrow was great.
(My ghost was almost gone.)
My tongue grew dry as tinder-wood,
All life was frozen fast.
I saw the setting Sun no more
After that dreary day,
For the tarns of the hills closed over my head,
And I left, released from torment.

The star of Hope forsook my breast;
Deeper grew my dread;
High it soared, nor ever sank
To give me rest again.
Noiseless and long was that new-dead night
When stark I lay on straw,
Fulfilling well the word of God
That man is made of the mould.
Give heed and see, O greatest God
Who hallowed earth and heaven,
How many fare in misery,
Beset by deadly sin!
Each wins the fruit of his waste or work:
The doer of good will gain.
In spite of my wealth, a bed of sand
I got at my day of death.
Lust of the flesh brings loss to men;
Many are mocked thereby.
Alas, that I loathed the waters of life
That cleanse the sorrowing sinner!

I sat nine days in the seat of the Norns,
And then bestrode a steed.

Sham were the suns that grimly shone
Through holes in a cloudy heaven.
High through the seven hallowed heavens
I seemed to ride in space;
High and low I looked for a way,
That my steed might gallop straight.

II. HELL

I now rehearse what my eyes beheld
When I trod the Place of Torment :
Scorching birds that were sighing souls
Fluttered as thick as flies.
I saw from the West the dragons of woe
Winging with wakes of fire;
When they shook their pinions, they seemed to shatter
The pallid sky to pieces.
I saw from the South the stag of the sun,
Led by two between them ;
His feet were firmly fixed on earth
But his horns were stretched through Heaven.
I saw from the North the Dark Moon's sons,
Spurring seven together.
Bright they drank out of brimming horns
Mead from the brook of Mammon.

Then the winds were stilled and the waters stopped
And a grinding groaned in my ears :
Adulterous women were milling dust
As meal for their paramours.
Stained with blood were the whirling stones
Worked by these wan-faced women ;
Blood-dripping hearts from their bosoms hung,
Mangled with many sorrows.

I watched the wounded men who walked
 Across the crimson paths;
I fancied that each fearful face
 Was bathed in witches' blood.
Souls of shame who had died unshriven
 I saw with signs of dread;
Pagan stars, with curses painted,
 Above their heads were held.
I saw the evil who envy ever
 The good that their neighbours gain;
Runes of grief were burned and graven
 Across their bleeding breasts.
Many I saw in sore distress,
 Stricken and far astray:
This is the end of all who ape
 The follies and fools of earth.
Men I saw who in many ways
 Had stolen the store of others;
Laden with lead, they staggered along
 In search of the City of Greed.
Some I saw who had slain to rob,
 Murdered many for gold;
Venomous vipers tore their veins
 And gnawed at their naked breasts.
Mockers I saw who minded not
 The holding of holy days;
Their hands were lashed in livid pain
 To rocks that were reeking hot.
I saw the proud whose rich apparel
 Had voiced their vain delight;
They now were clad in clothes of fire
 And strode in stately torment.
I saw the villains who had vowed
 Foul falsehood of their fellows;

Hell's rooks were rending ruthlessly
Their sight from out the sockets.
You never might know the numberless pangs
That the damned of Hell endure;
Suffering follows the sweetness of sin,
And pain succeeds to pleasure.

III. HEAVEN

I now rehearse [what my eyes beheld
In the highest, holiest Heaven,
Where life is illumined with endless light
And rest will reign forever].
Men I saw who had given much
For love of the law of God;
Candles of glory and honour gleamed
Brightly above their heads.
Men I saw who with all their might
Had helped the hungry poor;
Angels were reading from heavenly runes
And holy books to bless them.
Men I saw who had mortified
And chastened their flesh with fasting:
Angels of God bowed down in grace—
No higher bliss has Heaven.
Men I saw who provided meat
For the mouths of needy mothers;
On the beams of Heaven their beds are made
And softly spread forever.
Holy virgins had washed and hallowed,
Spotless and free from sin,
The souls of men who had marred their flesh
With penance and pious prayer.

Warriors came on the high blue way,
Riding the road to God;
Their leaders were men who had lost their lives,
The valiant killed without cause.

IV. INVOCATION.

God Almighty, most glorious Son,
Holy Ghost of Heaven,
I meekly pray to Thee our Maker,
Guard us from all evil!

And now, my son, this Song I taught
Deliver to the living,
The SONG OF THE SUN, in which I say
No falsehood may be found.
Here must we part, but shall meet again
In the glorious Day of Gladness.
O Lord, to the dead give rest indeed,
Be lenient to the living!

A marvellous tale in thy dream was told,
And thou didst see the same.
Never did mortal know till now
The sacred SONG OF THE SUN.

PART TWO
THE COURT POETS

EGIL SKALLAGRÍMSSON (910-990)

This is the first of the great Icelandic poets whom we know by name. He was born in 910, the son of a distinguished member of the new colony in the island. Much of his life was spent abroad, in the wandering career of a viking or in service at the royal courts of Norway and England. It is of interest to students of English history that he fought in King Æthelstan's retinue at the famous battle of Brunanburh in 937. Three great poems by Egil survive. The first, which is given in full below, is *The Head-Ransom*, composed in honour of King Eric Blood-axe, his hereditary enemy, when the latter held him prisoner at York, England, about 954, and purposed to put him to death. Technically the poem is notable as the first in Icelandic to use end-rhyme as well as alliteration, a device probably learned from the Latin hymns. *Arinbiorn's Lay*, his second poem, was written in Iceland about 960 and sent to Norway to his life-long friend Arinbiorn, a man who, as a Jonathan to his David at York in 954, had urged him to compose *The Head-Ransom* and had then made effective intercession with the king. His last poem, *The Sons' Wreck*, was composed in his old age to relieve his grief at the death of his two sons, Gunnar and Bodvar. Egil died at Borg in 990, blind and full of years.

THE HEAD-RANSOM

I

Over the waves of the west my way I pressed,
And pondered in my breast the poet's best.
My ship its journey bore from Iceland's shore;
Laden my heart with store of honour's ore.

The king a welcome pays ; I owe him praise.
I give great Odin's lays to England's gaze.
A song of laud I sing, salute the king,
And ask for leave to bring my ballading.

Hearken, O Monarch strong—I make my song,
Now that the courtier throng keep silence long.
All folk have known and thought how Eric fought,
But Odin saw the spot where sank the shot.

The clash of brand grew grim on buckler-rim,
Sword-rattle made a hymn, not mute or dim.
High waves of carnage cling about the king ;
The red blood-breakers fling fierce sullying.

Bright woven standards wield above the field
The message none will yield the merry shield ;
While battle's seething flood surged on in blood,
The roaring multitude wrought out their feud.

II

*The foe, spear-smitten, fell in that fierce hell ;
The fight brought endless fame to Eric's name.*

Further story of fierce glory
I'll salute if lords keep mute :
Brands were broken, blood-deeds wroken,
Wounds waxed wet as warriors met ;
Swords clanged loud on helm-crests proud ;
Carved their rage on crimson page ;
In that zeal of irate steel,
Men were lying, maimed and dying.

*Locked spears in battle played, blade gnashed on blade :
That fight brought endless fame to Eric's name.*

Red his glaive then fed the raven;
Red spears rife sought human life;
Scotland's bane slaked wolves with slain;
Hell might quarry on heaped-up carrion.
Shafts of battle, shivering, rattle;
Spear-barbs' core is soaked in gore;
Wolves bring death with dripping teeth;
Blood-surf streaks the galley's beaks.

*The veins of slaughter dyed the galley's side:
The wolves got eating rare from Eric there.*

Spears' release spoke not of peace,
Wolves rejoiced at war-shafts moist,
Bolts made din and bit within,
Bowstrings bore swift bane to soar.
Shield on arm across that storm,
See the king in carnage swing;
Round him lay the roughest fray;
Eric's name has endless fame.

*The hero bent the yew, the yard-shaft flew:
The wolves got eating rare from Eric there.*

III

Still I set forth the sovereign's worth,
Swiftly raise my song of praise:
Winds now make the waves awake
Round the ship where rafters rip.
Grace of kings, he gives men rings;
Prince of lords, he pays out hoards;
Hearts uplifts with handsome gifts,
Meed of gold most manifold.
Monarch great, he mastered fate;

Yew-bows screamed when sabres gleamed;
Through noble work the Norse rule York;
Proud the cause of such applause.

Consider, prince, how strong I wrought this song;
My heart is truly glad, such hush I had;
At York the poet's skill I so fulfil,
And draw from out my mind the task designed.
I have proclaimed thy praise with promised lays,
Skilled in the measured speech assemblies teach.
I bring bright honour's best from out my breast,
And cast my offering before the king.

*Accept, O king, my song, and prize it long
As Odin treasures high his only eye.*

KORMAK OGMUNDSSON. (*floruit* 960)

Born at Melarsandur-on-Midfjördur. This Icclander with an Irish name had an Erse mother. He is described as being burly and passionate, with a white skin and curly black hair. He spent much of his life in Norway, but was buried in Scotland, where he fell in a fight against a giant Scot. The central events of his life are associated with his unhappy love for a certain Steingerd, from whom he was separated by two successive husbands. Most of his poetry deals with his ill-starred passion.

TO STEINGERD

Fierce the foes that sitting
File their weapons wildly,—
Sons of a single sire
Seek me, hatred wreaking.
Could they come upon me,
Caught for open slaughter,
They were sure as sheep were
Should they hunt the wood-wolf.

Surly watchers waiting
Ward me from my adored one.
They have truly taken
Tasks beyond their asking;
For the more they mutter,
Must I that much trust her;
Men's fierce malice gives me
Measure of my treasure.

Surly watchers waiting
Ward me from my adored one.
They are as like to lash now
Legs on a snake by pegging,
Or make the rushing river
Run up hill, as sunder
Us, thou noble nature;
Never shall we sever!

HALLFRED "VANDRÆDASKALD" (960-1000)

Born in the north of Iceland. A hot-headed, violent man, apparently part Irish. Nicknamed "Vandrædaskald" i.e., "the troublesome poet." He became a trader and settled in Norway, where he entered the service of Earl Hakon and later of King Olaf Tryggvason. He embraced Christianity at King Olaf's request, yet reluctantly, as the following verses suggest. He was absent in Iceland when his master perished in the great naval battle at Swold in the year 1000. Hallfred himself died at sea not long afterwards; and now lies in Iona by the side of Macbeth.

LINES ON HIS CONVERSION

Of old I worshipped Odin,
Offered homage softly
To him, the eagle-hearted,
High on Lithshelf biding.
Poets then were pious,
Praise to Odin raising;
Now they mar their manners;
Men's old faiths are ended.
Since we serve Messiah,
Svithur comes not hither.
Reluctantly I leave him,
Lord my heart adored once.
Olaf orders all men
Offerings to scoff at.
All the ancient Norn-rites

Aching we forsake now.
Gods of old in grief we
Glorify no more here.
I'm compelled to palter,
Pray to Christ as Saviour.

May Frey and Freyja hate me!
Fiery Thor retire now!
Fiends be friends to Odin!
Far be Njord' son warded!
On the only Godhead
All my love is calling;
The wrath of Christ has conquered,
King whose praise we're singing.

LAMENT ON OLAF TRYGGVASON

Alas that I was lacking,
Left the king bereft then,
Though where weapons welter
Weak were one man's wreaking!
We are torn in twain now;
Tides of swords divide us.
Daily do I mourn him—
Deep my woe unsleeping.

Earth and sky shall sever,
Sunder loud with thunder,
Ere great Olaf's equal
On this earth shall wander.
Best he was and bravest
Born beneath the morning.
Christ the pure One keep him
Clear in heaven appearing!

GUNNLAUG ORMSTUNGA (*floruit* 1000)

Gunnlaug "Snakestongue" (so called because of his stinging satire) was an Icelandic chieftain, famed in saga. On the eve of departure for foreign lands, he was betrothed to Helga the Fair, a granddaughter of Egil Skallagrímsson, but agreed with her father that he must return to consummate the marriage within three years or the contract would be void. He visited King Æthelred of England in London, King Sigtrygg Silkbeard in Dublin, and King Olaf of Sweden at Upsala; and from all of these he won praises and gifts for his poetry. He was, however, late in returning to Iceland, and his deadly rival, Hrafn Önundsson, contracted with Helga's father for a reluctant bride. Two duels were fought by Gunnlaug and Hrafn, and in the second encounter both were killed. The following verses are all that remains of his encomium on King Sigtrygg in Dublin:

Sigtrygg gives the wolf his carrion to engulf,
Well-taught in skaldic ways I turn to praise
A king beyond compare, Cuaran's heir:
His grace will not withhold a ring of gold,
So generous is he now judged to be.
I, king, would have thy word thou ne'er hast heard
A poem that is sweeter in plaudit metre.

SKULI THORSTEINSSON (*floruit* 1000)

A grandson of Egil Skallagrímsson. Fought among the enemies of King Olaf at Swold. Only a few verses of his poetry survive; yet the following lines on a sunrise suggest a power of poetic perception possessed by few of his contemporaries:

SUNRISE

When the gracious goddess
Goes with footsteps rosy,
Gleaming in her glory,
Grey the moon sinks paling.

SIGHVATUR THÖRDARSON (995-1043)

Born and brought up in the south of Iceland. Described as dark of hair and eyes, hesitant in speech but able to improvise good verse as fast as another man could talk. Entered the service of St. Olaf in 1015, and fought in the naval battle of Nesia between the king and Earl Sweyn (see poem below). Sent on a diplomatic mission to Novgorod. In 1025 was god-father to St. Olaf's son, afterwards King Magnus. Visited Normandy and the English court of Cnut in 1026-1027. Went on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1029. The fateful news of his master's death at Stiklestad reached him on his return journey. He died about 1043 and was buried in the cathedral at Trondhjem (Nidaros). Sighvatur is the only one of the court-poets who succeeded in expressing a genuine poetic spirit through the hampering medium of court metre and diction.

THE BATTLE OF NESIA

Olaf in spring from eastward
Out of the gulf sailed stoutly;
Sweyn from the north came sweeping,
Swift black oars were lifting.
My tongue can tell their story,
Treat their bloody meeting;
Answer, too, for Olaf;
I was there beside him.

The king made keenest onslaught,
Caught Earl Sweyn by water,

Rode in rage the haven,
Red the blood they shed there.
Olaf dashed to onset
Openly and hopeful;
Sweyn's retainers tightly
Tethered the ships together.

Olaf fixed his flagship
Fast by Sweyn's high mast-head;
Thick his thanes to battle
Thundered on Palm Sunday.
In that sacred season
Solemnly I followed;
Piously in Poitou
Piece I kept my Easter.

Sweyn was not forsworn there,
Sweet his deeds in meeting;
None might outshine Olaf,
All men gallant called him.
Both the ship-crews boldly
Burst in conflict thirsty;
Spears and swords were brandished
Seeking bloodshed reeking.

Cold across our shoulders
Coats of steel-mail floated;
We of Olaf's wolf-band
Wore bright armor o'er us;
My black curls I covered,
Kept where shaft-rain swept me
Garbed in Gallic helmet.
Gay, my friend, we played there.

Stoutly golden standards
Streamed; in mail-coats gleaming
On their ships we shouldered,
Showed the king who strode there.
Grim on foemen's galleys
Gripped the warriors slipping,
Not like maidens mingling
Mead for henchmen greedy.

Shields that shone like silver
Shabby grew, blood-dabbled;
Ruddy ran the sword-blade,
Reddest life-blood shedding.
The king closed with the foeman's
Craft, and we went after.
Much do I remember:
Mighty was the fighting.

Briskly did we board them;
Broke, their deeds invoking.
Red swords rent the targes,
Ring of blades was singing.
Wounded foes sought water,
Went by board far spent there.
Groups of grisly corpses
Gory floated shorewards.

Sweyn himself in sorrow
Sought not to be caught so;
Bade men break with axes
Boldly the spars close-holding.
Hard they hewed the ship-prows,
Hacked in frenzy whacking;
Broke the beaks that stoutly
Bound them there confounded.

Many a man, I take it,
Met his doom, regretting
Hope withheld forever
Home from ever roaming;
Many a man sank dumbly
'Mid the billows hidden,
When off shore we shattered
Ships while foemen gripped us.

With little lack of courage
Ladies might upbraid us,
Though our folk were fewer
Fighting forces mightier.
If aught be blamed to any
(All indeed were gallant)
Let mock be made of the vanquished,
Moaning loud and groaning.

Power grows apace for
Princely Olaf since we,
Upland men, past measure,
Marred Sweyn's luckless party.
All the land has learned it.
Loud the Heathmen proudly
Ask no idler's prowess,
Ale in halls assailing.

OTHERE THE BLACK (*floruit* 1025)

Of Othere's lineage we know little except that he was an Icelfander and a near kinsman of Sighvatur Thórdarson. As his name implies, he was black-haired and dark-eyed. According to tradition he nearly lost his life through addressing a passionate poem of praise to Anstrid, wife of St. Olaf, king of Norway, but saved his head by another poem in praise of the king himself. Othere was in high favour at the court of Sweden, and also visited King Cnut of England at Winchester in 1027. The following lines are from a poem which he addressed to Cnut on that occasion :

You bathed your blade with blood
Bold one, near Norwich holding
Warfare whose fame shall flourish
Well after you are knelled.
Close near Tees you conquered;
King, you felled the English;
Caused the Dike to dribble
Deep o'er corpses sleeping;
Broke the fast of blackest
Birds of prey at Shirstone;
Sweyn's most gallant scion
Sought for fame and fought there.

THORMOD BERSASON (*died* 1030)

Another dark-haired Icclander, unlucky in love. He was mortally wounded, fighting for St. Olaf at the battle of Stiklestad, and just before his death is said to have addressed the following verses to a nurse who questioned him upon his paleness :

Sure the maiden marvels,
Marks my pallor starker.
Arrows lamed me, lady;
Lance-wounds never grant one
Fairness; flying iron
Fierce and black has pierced me.
Steel my ribs has rended;
Reeling now I feel it.

Neither red nor ruddy
Rayed my face is, lady.
Men no longer mind me,
Maimed with woundings shameful.
I pay my dues to Death now;
Danish weapons pained me;
Scars of storms of battle
Smart as life is parting.

THIODOLF ARNORSSON (*died* 1067?)

Little is known of Thiodolf's ancestry except that he was born in Iceland of poor parents. He came to Norway as early as 1043 and was leading poet of the court of King Harold. He was present at the fatal battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, but seems to have survived his master. His best poem describes the launch of a dragon-ship by Harold on the River Nith in 1048.

THE LAUNCH OF THE DRAGON

I look on a galley, lady,
Launched on its gleaming haunches.
See where the decks of the Dragon
Dip, by the harbor slipping.
The shimmering Serpent's shoulders
Shine with light divinest;
Her neck with gold is netted
Now she has left her housing.

Early the earnest monarch
Awning furls at dawning;
Ladies leave the city,
Look on the proud Snake hookèd.
The youthful king is cleaving
Currents westward hurried;
Down the bay the blade-oars
Bite the waters lightly.

True in time the oarsmen
Turn their scull-blades churning;
Ladies watch and wonder,
Wide-eyed at their gliding;
Ere their oars should sever,
Irate their aspiring.
Prettily the princess
Praise to Harold raises.

Roughly strains the rowlock,
Riving blades are striving,
Seventy are smiting
Seas like one man freely.
Norsemens drive the Dragon
Down the river frowning;
Ladies vow the Viper
Vies with wings of iron.

ARNOR THORRODSSON, THE EARLS' POET
(*died ca. 1073*)

Son of Thorrod Kolbeinsson, another Icelandic skald. Most of his life was spent at the court of the Orkney Earls. He married a kinswoman of the great Earl Thorfinn, and is buried in the Orkneys. He is the Marlowe of the court poets, full of fire and magnificence of phrase. The following lines are taken from a poem in eight-measured court-metre or "flow metre," composed in 1046 in honour of King Magnus of Norway:

Magnus, hear my mighty measure!
More art thou than all before thee.
I will praise thy peerless prowess,
Put thee first, thou dread of Jutland.
Less than thee are all kings living,
Lord (true hawk thou) of the Hordfolk.
May thy glory ever gleaming
Greatest be while time is dated.

With thy warship thou didst wander,
Waves surmounting, battle craving;
Held within its hollow hull,
Halted not across the Baltic.
Shrankst thou not at masts a-shiver,
Shuddering decks with ice-coat crudded,
Figure-heads in frenzy rattling,
Boiling seas and billows moiling.

MARK SKEGGJASON (*died* 1108)

Noted not merely as a court poet but also as one of the wisest of Iceland's "law-speakers". He held the speakership from 1084 until his death in 1108. The following poem on a ship thought of as a bear is a fair sample of the artificial style which was popular in an age of decadence.

THE SHIP AS A BEAR

Wading through the waters
Went the stream-bear gently;
O'er peaks of the plunging whale-home
Ploughed the mast-bear loudly;
On tracks of tall ships olden
Trailed the flood-bear sailing;
Through the thronging billows
Thrust the sea-bear lusty.

EINAR SKULASON (*died 1160*)

Born in the west of Iceland and remotely descended from Egil Skallagrímsson. Spent most of his life in Norway. A priest as well as a court poet. His most famous poem, *The Beam*, composed on St. Olaf by royal request, was recited by him in Trondhjem cathedral, July 29, 1154, in the presence of the three Norse kings, Eystan, Sigurd, and Ingi. Einar is notable for the quantity and technical perfection of his surviving work, but in inspiration he falls below the earlier poets.

From "The Beam"

Let us all now eagerly
Offer praises lofty,
We owe the Beam our anthem—
Olaf, high and holy.
Heroes under heaven
Hail him all-prevailing,
Shining through the shadows,
Showing signs of power.

Eystan, king, I counsel,
Kindly hear my mind here.
Sigurd, hear my singing;
Sweetly shall I treat it.
In the ears of Ingi
Is my poem risen.
I pray your sainted sire
My song to render stronger.

PART THREE
THE MIDDLE AGES

KOLBEINN TUMASON (*died* 1208)

In his day, the most powerful chieftain in northern Iceland.
Lost his life in a skirmish with the lawless retinue of Gudmund
Arason, a scandalous bishop of Hólar.

HEAVEN-SHAPER, HEAR!

Heaven-shaper, hear!
My heart draws near.
May Thy mercy be
Mild and sweet to me!
Created by Thy might,
I cry, and crave Thy light.
I am Thy erring thrall;
Thou art my All in All.

O God, I pray Thee, kneeling,
To give me healing.
Remember me, I pray
With peace to-day.
Austere and terrible,
Who dost the stars annul,
Drive from the doubting heart
All dole and smart!

Guard me, gracious God!
While the ground is trod
Man has need of Thee,
Making grace his plea.

Sacred virgin's son,
Who canst help alone,
Place within my breast
Prayers that please Thee best!

EYSTEINN ASGRÍMSSON (*died* 1361)

The first that we hear of Eysteinn is in 1343, when, as a monk in the Thykkvabær monastery, he was placed in irons by Bishop Jón Sigurdsson for insubordination and incontinence. Evidently he made his peace with the church, for a decade later we find him an official at Helgafell and intimate with Gyrd, the Norwegian bishop of Skálholt. He spent 1355-1357 in Norway, where he was made a canon of the cloister of Helgisetr, near Trondhjem. In 1357, he returned to Iceland as an ecclesiastical inspector. Here he fell foul of Bishop Gyrd, was excommunicated by him, and was in turn vindicated by the archbishop. He died on Good Friday, 1361, in the monastery at Helgisetr. We do not know just when and where he wrote his one great poem, *Lilja* ("The Lily"), but we find in it such an expression of a passionate and eloquent nature as accords well with our fragmentary knowledge of his life. It is a sort of Messiad, consisting, like many medieval poems, of one hundred stanzas, and written in a free adaptation of eight-stressed court-metre. The extracts given below, however, are translated into simple octosyllabic couplets in an endeavour to escape from rigidity in the English.

From "The Lily"

My lady, did thy milken breast
Refresh the holy infant's rest?
And hast thou, Mary, gazed upon
The nail-torn hands of thy dear son?
No other care can rank above
The service of thy suffering love.

Forgive, O thou so quick to plead
In aid of all who intercede!

Thou art the crown of motherhood,
Thou livest, sanctified and good,
Thou hast a most forgiving heart,
Thou bringest balm for evil's smart.
Ah, Mary, see our wounds and fears!
Ah, Mary, shed a mother's tears!
Ah, Mary, graciously restore
With myrrh of mercy for the sore!

The holy themes that men rehearse
In veiled obscurities of verse
Are often decked with terms designed
To make the meaning hard to find.
My purpose unequivocal
Should make my message clear to all;
That men may grasp it, willy-nilly,
I name my sacred song THE LILY.

LOFTUR GUTTORMSSON, "THE RICH"

(1380-1432)

Loftur's father was killed while the boy was still quite young, and the son was therefore brought up at the home of his grandfather, Ormur Snorrason at Skard, which was then a great seat of learning. Loftur was high-born on both sides of the house, and inherited such enormous wealth after the Black Death that he became the richest man in the history of Iceland. It is said that he travelled abroad and was knighted by Eric of Pomerania. He was also governor of Iceland for a time. The only poem that can with certainty be ascribed to Loftur is *Háttalykill* ("The Key to Metres"), a sequence of love-poems in ninety different metres addressed to his mistress, Kristina Oddsdóttir.

From "The Key to Metres"

Three, indeed, methinks
Things are hard to suffer:
Mates to miss, or money,
Or a loving maiden.
Quick my choice is chosen;
The chances are uneven:
Woman weighs in value
More than wealth or comrades.

Kiss me, dear, for duly
Comes a day we cannot;
Then no more we'll mingle
Mouths by mountain-sunsets.

Hands are raised to hinder
From our hateful kindred—
Plague upon their plaintive
Ban on all our pleasure!

THE BALLAD OF TRISTRAM (ca. 1400)

From the 14th century to the 16th romances in the French fashion held sway in Iceland, eclipsing the court poetry almost as effectively as the court poetry had displaced the epic tradition. The *Ballad of Tristram* treats one of the most famous themes of the "matter of Britain"—the old Irish story of Tristram and Iseult, which has been attempted by many hands from Thomas of Brittany down to Richard Wagner. The Icelandic ballad, which treats simply of the death of the lovers, is one of the finest versions in any literature. The background need hardly be recalled: The young knight Tristram was sent to Ireland to bring back Iseult the Fair to be the wife of his lord, King Mark of Cornwall. By misadventure, Tristram and Iseult drink on shipboard of a magic love-potion that had been intended for the royal couple. This seals their passionate love forever, but duty separates them and Tristram goes to Brittany where he vainly seeks to assuage his grief with Iseult the Dark. He is wounded in a great battle and sends across to Cornwall for the healing help of Iseult the Fair. She comes to him, but the jealous Iseult the Dark brings him a false report as the boat nears shore, and he dies of despair. Iseult the Fair in her turn dies across his bier. The ballad-poet is struck by the tragic separation of the lovers in life and in death.

Tristram against the heathen hound

The battle set;

Many a man got bloody wounds

When there they met.—

To the lovers it was shapen but to sunder.

Back was he borne upon a shield,
That brave young knight;
Many a leech sought leave to heal
His body's blight.

But all their leechcraft he refused
And swore a vow:
"Only Iseult, that lady fair,
May heal me now!"

Tristram sends his messengers
And three men leap:
"O go and tell Iseult the Fair
My wounds are deep."

Tristram sends his messengers;
Five take his plea:
"O go and tell Iseult the Fair
To come to me.

"And bid her as I shall command
Prepare her trip:
Let all the sails be dyed with blue
Upon her ship."

His messengers to Cornwall came
O'er waters dim:
"Young Tristram, lady, bids you come
To visit him."

Then went Iseult into the hall
And sought the king:
"O may I not to this knight, thy friend,
Some healing bring?"

The king made answer in angry wise
And stern did say:
"He spurns the healing of all the rest;
He must be fey."

Iseult the Fair with softest speech
Pled piteously;
Her arms about the monarch's neck
Made earnest plea.

"I'd gladly let thee heal this knight
Of his sore wound,
Could I but know thou wouldst return
Both safe and sound."

"With God must rest my safe return,"
The lady quoth.
"I may not in this journey now
Forget my troth."

She cast on her a sable fur
With sigh and tear;
Then went the jewelled lady out
Upon the pier.

"I must as Tristram did command
Prepare my trip,
And let the sails be all of blue
Upon my ship."

They wound the sails as the lady bade
To the masthead high;
To Tristram she will not fail to come,
So like to die.

Iseult the Dark went from the hall,
And said not true:
"Black are the sails upon the ship
Instead of blue."

Into the hall Iseult the Dark
Returned once more:
"Black are the sails upon the ship
That nears the shore."

Tristram turned his face to the wall,
And naught he spake.
Three miles away a man might hear
That great heart break.

They brought the blue-sailed ship to shore
On the cold black sand;
Retainers bore Iseult the Fair
The first to land.

Long was the way they had to walk;
The road was wide;
But ever she heard the sound of bells
That clanged and cried.

Long was the way they had to walk;
It marred the feet;
And ever she heard the sound of bells
And chanting sweet.

Then said Iseult, the lady fair
From o'er the foam:
"Tristram, alas, should not be dead
When I come home."

Iseult came into the solemn church
With a hundred men;
The priests were chanting their last farewell
O'er his body then.

Iseult o'er his confined body bent,
Like a rose-bud bright;
The silent priests in the chancel stood
By candle-light.

Iseult o'er his confined body bent;
Scarce seemed alive;
The silent priests in the chancel stood
With candles five.

Many a heart in this weary world
With woe is fed.
Iseult o'er his confined body bent,
And lay there dead.

The bitter soul of Iseult the Dark
With grief was torn.
Two bodies then from the ivied church
Were straightway borne.

Iseult the Dark in anger spoke,
And took her troth:
"If I can help it, death shall fail
To join them both!"

Hastily, quickly they were laid
Beneath the mould;
To north and south of the church they lie
Alone and cold.

And from their graves two birches grow
That mutely strain
Across the roof of that dark church
To meet, in vain.—
To them it was not shapen but to sunder.

JÓN ARASON (1484-1550)

The last Catholic bishop in Iceland, beheaded at Skálholt by his enemies in 1550. Wrote some very beautiful religious poetry, including *Ljómur* ("The Light of the World"), in which his sympathy for mankind quite disregards the teaching of the Church on eternal damnation. His secular poetry is also of considerable historical importance, dealing, as the following epigrams do, with contemporary events.

STRAY VERSES

The world is on the wane;
Friendships waste away;
Help from hypocrites
Hurts the human heart.

Faith is failing fast;
Faint is truth and weak;
Valor is vanquished quite,
And virtue violated.

Our age has come to an evil hour
When greedy traitors our wealth devour,
And Danish judges upon me lour,
And I perish thus in the monarch's power!

BJARNI JÓNSSON "FRÁ HÚSAFELL"
(*floruit* 1600)

Little is known concerning his life except that he resided at Húsafell in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He was the author of familiar nonsense-rhymes, as well as of hymns and songs. His best-known work, *The Song of Centuries*, voices a strongly conservative protest against the Reformation and the changes which it introduced.

From "The Song of Centuries"

The sun of God is pale
As gold that smoke-clouds veil.
The flow'rs in wold and fen
Are withered like old men.
Each year brings ravage strong—
Yes, everything goes wrong.
The gale bites fierce with frost,
Our feeble sheep are lost,
The ice and snow decree
Distress by land and sea,
In summer scarce a bird
Through scanty fields is heard.
Far other were our ways
In good old papal days:
Love lingered among men,
And virtue prospered then;
Men lauded Iceland long
For faith and wealth and song.

Then most men still adored
The milk of God's true Word,
And gained from hill and sea
A harvest full and free.
In annals there is writ
The golden tale of it.

PART FOUR
MODERN POETRY

EINAR SIGURDSSON (1539-1626)

Born at Hraun in Adaldalur. Graduated 1557 from the Latin School at Hólar and was ordained the same year at the age of 18. Endured hardship in many poor incumbencies in the north of Iceland, tribulation which persisted until his eldest son Oddur a youth of brilliant intellect, became Bishop of Skálholt in 1589 at the age of 30, and put an end to his father's poverty. Rev. Einar was given the living of Eydalur and the archdeaconry of Mulathing, and performed his duties diligently until his death at the age of 87. He had a patriarchal profusion of good children: 100 descendants mourned him when he died; and 70 years after his death there were 36 clergymen in Iceland descended from him. Einar was notable for the beauty of his hymns, especially at a time when the Reformation had brought a deluge of doggerel translated from the German. Much of his work was included in the new *Hymnbook* issued by Bishop Gudbrand in 1612 in an effort to redeem the degraded hymnody of the time.

From "The Manger-Song"

I lift thee from thy stall this night
Though I am guilty in thy sight,
A baby's anger should be light.
Near my side, I prithee, lie.
Sleep, my babe, I sing thy lullaby!

In sweet arms I wrap thee now,
Kiss thy dearest infant brow.
Let thy grace these acts allow

If my sufferance they outfly.
Sleep, my babe, I sing thy lullaby!

No abode of wood or stone
Is, alas, prepared thine own.
I would make my heart thy throne,
Cradle thee and glorify.
Sleep, my babe, I sing thy lullaby!

Love is o'er thy cradle spread,
Love upon thy pillow shed.
Meek is she who tends thy bed;
Mother, yet she hails thee high.
Sleep, my babe, I sing thy lullaby!

HALLGRÍMUR PÉTURSSON (1614-1674)

Born and brought up at Hólar, the cathedral seat of the North, where his father was sexton for his kinsman, the famous bishop Gudbrand. Hallgrímur studied at the Latin School at Hólar, but left for some unknown reason and sailed for Copenhagen, where he became a blacksmith's apprentice. A kindly friend persuaded him to resume his studies, however, and in 1637 he graduated with distinction from the University of Copenhagen. Just then there came to the Danish capital some ransomed Icelanders who had been captured by the Moors in a raid on Iceland ten years before. As their knowledge of the Christian faith had begun to fade, young Hallgrímur was procured to give them religious instruction. One of their number was a young widow, Gudrid Simonardóttir, who prosecuted a love affair with Hallgrímur so effectively that he forsook his studies, went with her to Iceland, and married her. For several years they lived in great poverty at Sudurnes, but in 1644 he was ordained as a clergyman and inducted at Hvalsnes. In 1651 he received the living of Saurbær, and here most of his poetry was written, including his fifty magnificent *Psalms of the Passion* (published 1666). He retired in 1669 on account of leprosy, and died in 1674 at Ferstiklu. His gravestone is still to be found just outside the door of the little church at Saurbær, where the music of his psalms may yet be heard on Sundays. He is perhaps the greatest poet of Iceland, and is certainly one of the greatest religious poets of any age or country. In his *Passíussálmar*, written in a rich variety of metres with splendour of figure and warmth of expression, the poet follows the Christ through his last hours of life and comments with poignant emotion on every word and gesture of the Master.

These psalms, which have been called "the flower of Icelandic poetry, ancient and modern," have already passed through 45 editions. One of them is given in translation below, as well as his *Funeral Psalm*, which has been sung at most Icelandic funerals for nearly three centuries. He also wrote some excellent secular poetry, such as *Aldarháttur*, a contrasting of the present with the golden past.

PASSION-HYMN 50

And so my spirit waits a space
Lord Jesus, by Thy burial-place;
And as I watch beside Thy grave
My soul grows brave,
And all death's terrors cease to rave.

Thou hast my dark offenses borne
Thyself, when in deep tortures torn;
Thou didst, dear Lord, endure for me
Sin's penalty,
And set my heart rejoicing free.

My sins were buried in Thy tomb;
Thy righteousness now takes their room;
In the deep sea my vices vast
Thy hand has cast
To lie forgot while ages last.

So now my pardon has been sealed,
And my repentant spirit healed:
Behold the dawn of righteousness
Now breaks to bless
Man's trusting soul with happiness.

Thy death, O Jesus, here has slain
The lusts that in the body reign;

Thy grave has hid my errors quite
From God's dread sight;
I strengthen in Thy risen might.

Thou seest the rock-tomb of my heart
Won by the Holy Spirit's art;
Faith's linen-cloth I leave to Thee,
Who set me free,
Sweet with repentance' fragrancy.

In Thee I find all quiet rest.
Come Thou, O Jesus, to my breast,
And seal my life with faith and grace;
Here show Thy face,
And make my heart Thy dwelling-place!

All glory, praise, and power be Thine!
May honour pure and wisdom shine
O Lord, in Thee, till 'mid the spheres
Earth disappears—
Yea, down through everlasting years!

FUNERAL-HYMN

All life is like the flower
That grows upon the plain,
And meets the morning hour
In grace without a stain;
But in a moment flying
Time cuts its beauty down,
And leaves and colours dying
Like human life are flown.

So swiftly childhood passes
Uncertain of Death's ways,

While those whom Age harasses
Still run the self-same race.
No seal of gain or winning
Is stamped upon Life's day,
But all, from their beginning,
Are doomed to pass away.

Thus Death is to all seeming
Most like a reaper hoar
Whose sickle ever gleaming
Smites all that lies before.
All grasses he opposes;
All shining flowers fair;
To sedges, reeds, and roses
Alike his blade is bare.

For man's life lingers never
And knows not respite here;
Death grimly grasps forever
To bear us to the bier.
All ways of earth lead thither
To that unfailing goal;
The grieved and glad march hither,
The bourne of every soul.

From honour and dominion
Death's onset draws not back;
No pay can bind his pinion,
Nor bar his onward track.
Though tears or rage seek often
To change his changeless fate,
No prayer or curse may soften
His heart of bitter hate.

No rank or shining raiment
I find beneath the heav'n:
The soul as loan, not payment,
Is to the body giv'n.
From God came the concession;
He claims my latest breath;
And so my Lord's possession
I yield his herald, Death.

Then in God's name I'm resting,
Since such an end must come,
And since no weak protesting
Can stay that common doom.
Then when Death stands before me,
And no reprieve is bought,
Though night shall gather o'er me,
My soul shall tremble not.

STEFÁN ÓLAFSSON (1620-1688)

Son of Archdeacon Ólafur of Kirkjubær and grandson of the Rev. Einar Sigurdsson. Studied Icelandic antiquity at the University of Copenhagen, and translated *Völuspá* into Latin. Lectured on Norse archeology at the University of Paris. In 1648, he returned to Iceland, and secured the living of Vallanes, where he was a clergyman until his death in 1688. In his earlier years he was very gay and energetic, but about 40 his health gave way and thereafter he had to have a curate. He now turned to poetry and was as successful in the treatment of secular themes as his contemporary Hallgrímur was in religious verse. Genial, droll, satirical, he gives us an inimitable picture of Icelandic life in the seventeenth century. He also recaptured the metrical skill of an earlier age, and produced many fine lyrics (e.g. "The Lost Love," here translated), such as had been unknown for many centuries. In a later age he had great influence upon such poets as Bólu-Hjálmar and Páll Ólafsson. His secular poems were published with a biography by Jón Thorkelsson in 1885-1886.

THE LOST LOVE

Fair maid, my own,
I loved alone
And cherished beyond measure,
I make my moan
That far has flown
Life's fairest, dearest pleasure.

That noble maid
A path has strayed,
A way one day shall hold me.
Her features fade
And sink to shade;
She sleeps who once consoled me.

In grief aghast
I mourn the past;
Loss stabs me to dejection.
While life shall last
My mistress chaste
Shall light my recollection.

In fashion fell
Did death compel
Her sleep in regions shady.
I here must dwell—
A long farewell
Until we meet, my lady.

PÁLL VÍDALÍN (1667-1727)

Born at Vididalstunga. Descended on his father's side from the Bishop Gudbrand who translated the Bible into Icelandic in the sixteenth century. Graduated at 21 in theology from the University of Copenhagen. Became a master in Skálholt School, and later an attorney and district judge. Died at Thingvellir in 1727. One of the most learned men in Iceland in his day. As a poet he was skilful and sagacious, but little of his poetry survives except stray verses. Bibliography: *Vísnaðver* (1897).

EPIGRAMS

If I talk to them with truth,
They will answer with a lie.
My dear departed sire in sooth
Voiced the same complaint as I.

Fate is sent from heaven above;
Fortunes careless roam;
Spells of varying threads are wove;
But vice is born at home.

HIS LAST VERSE

Weary I am of world and sky,
Worse my weakness day by day;
As I turn to other strands,
Strange is all the strife of man.

BJÖRN HALLDÓRSSON (1724-1794)

Born at Vogsosum. Graduated from Skálholt School in 1745. For some years district clerk and curate. Later priest in Saudlauksdalur 1752-1782, and at Setberg, 1782-1786. He died in 1794 and had then been blind for some years. The Rev. Björn was one of the most worthy men of his age, and was especially interested in the promotion of horticulture and scientific farming. He wrote *Atla* and *Arnbjörgu*, important guide-books for Icelandic peasants and farmers. He also prepared a great Icelandic-Latin dictionary, which Rask, the Danish philologist, later augmented and edited in 1814. The following poem is a fitting credo for one whose long life was spent untiringly in the service of science, man, and religion.

THE FAITHFUL SERVANT

The days of life are dust,
But duty still abides;
And he with earth feels least disgust
Whom honest travail guides.
'Tis better far to meet the night all weary
When one has made the Master's talent more,
Than grossly snore
Through day's brief hours with dull face bleary.

Thus I shall undertake
To lodge the Master's guests,
To shelter wanderers for his sake
As duty still attests;

That when men follow after, I bequeath
Some influence to bless and beautify;
Then turn to lie
Contented in the dark mould underneath.

EGGERT ÓLAFSSON (1726-1768)

Born at Svefneyjar, Breidafjörður. Skálholt School and the University of Copenhagen (course in natural science). Took part, beginning 1750, in important explorations in Iceland, the published results of which were translated into several languages. He instituted a movement to purify the Icelandic language from alien borrowings and to stimulate a national spirit. His work was cut short when he was drowned in a shipwreck at the age of 42. His poetry, which suffers from deliberate archaisms, was published posthumously in 1832.

THE FOREIGN TASTE

Butter, odzooks, must be on
Dainty food you dine upon,
Or your energy is gone,
Stranger disputative!
Try a sup of oatmeal brose,
Shark-oil neat will dry your toes,
Make you like a native.

JÓN THORLÁKSSON (1744-1819)

Born at Selárdalur-on-Arnarfjörður. Graduate from Skálholt School in 1763 and became a priest five years later. Received the living of Bægisá in 1788, and was there until his death at the age of 75. Although seriously deficient in poetic originality, he became the greatest road-maker of a new era by reason of his masterly translations into Icelandic from foreign languages, especially English and German. Thus he rendered into his native tongue Pope's *Essay on Man*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Klopstock's *Messias*, and many poems by lesser poets. His long life of industry and poverty bore fruit in the generation that followed him. Bibliography (original poetry): *Ljóðabók*, 2 vols. (1842-1843), *Úrval* (1919).

POVERTY

Pale poverty has dogged my days
Since in this world my life did start;
For three score years and ten, our ways
Have seldom wandered far apart;
Whether in heav'n I'll shake her clear,
He only knows Who joined us here.

FAREWELL TO SUMMER

See, the summer now is past;
Death devours
Radiant flowers
And their gentle hosts at last.

Luck on hastening feet departs,
All her golden
Gifts withholden;
Grief and tears assail our hearts.

Withered earth shows pale decay
Traced in shadows
O'er our meadows;
Flesh and grass both waste away.

Let us welcome winter too!
Bitter-sweet
Cold and heat,
Mingle all our life-time through.

Summertime, we sing with pain
This thy going,
Glad with knowing
Thou wilt come next year again.

SIGURDUR PÉTURSSON (1759-1827)

Born at Kirkjubær, son of a royal sheriff. Visited Copenhagen with his father in 1768 and 1774. Graduated with distinction from the University of Copenhagen. Appointed sheriff of Kjósarsýsla in 1789. Resigned on account of ill-health in 1801. Thereafter lived in Reykjavík with Bishop G. Vídalín, a friend and former classmate. Sigurdur Pétursson was Iceland's first dramatist, and left behind three comedies. His works were published posthumously, *Ljóðmæli* in 1844 and *Leikrit* in 1846.

THE WAY OF LOVE

I

Grace of sight and grace of speech
Lead to lure of tender glances,
Brave avowals each to each—
These are love's own utterances.

Man and maid in ancient ways
Undertake the joys of passion;
Little lack of skill betrays
They are strangers to its fashion.

Maid and man entwine desires
In the bond of nuptial union;
Like the blending of two fires
Is the flame of their communion.

II

These were two, and now are one;
All the world is hushed in sleep;

Tender rites, observed of none,
On this bridal night they keep.

Even so the lambs will play
In the grassy fields of spring,
When the wolf is far away
From their happy frolicking.

Even so the summer doves
Coo upon the flowering tree,
Blend their gentle murmuring loves,
Free from hawks' harsh villainy.

They will love each other best
Through all trials, hopes, and harms;
Nought seems sweeter than to rest
Wrapped in one another's arms.

III

I've a lass of soul and sense,
Chaste of life and fair of cheek.
Her to serve with reverence
All my days I vow to seek.

Bright her shoulder's snowy hue,
Radiant sunshine's counterpart;
Clear her eye of heaven's blue,
Warm with wishes of the heart.

And her bosom is a mead
Where my happy head would lie;
Here is paradise indeed,
Here I choose to live and die.

BENEDIKT GRÖNDAL (1762-1825)

Born at Vogl-on-Mývatn. Graduated from Hólar School in 1781, and took his degree in law from the University of Copenhagen in 1791. He was a superior court judge from 1800 to 1817, and then retired on account of ill health. He was a gifted man, whose poetry, though obscure and old-fashioned, was highly esteemed in its day. He translated Pope's *Temple of Fame* into Icelandic verse. Bibliography: *Kvæði* (1833).

WISDOM

Favor a fool who's frantic,
He'll go his follied way
And many a crazy antic
Will mar your peace to-day.
Waste on him no good nature:
Just knock him on the jaw.
Such basting of the creature
Is back by wisdom's law.

BJARNI THÓRARENSEN (1786-1841)

Born at Brautarholt and brought up at Hlíðarendi in the Southwest. A precocious student, taking his degree in law from the University of Copenhagen at the age of 20. Long a judge of the superior court. Sub-governor in the North and East of Iceland, 1833-1841. A leader of the Romantic Movement, in harmony with which he goes back to the Eddic poetry for his inspiration. He is notable for his virility of intellect, which never permits his ardent emotion to soar into sentimental extravagance. His poems were chiefly occasional, and excel in dealing with patriotism and love. His *Eldgamla Ísafold*, which promptly became the national anthem, was written when he was only 18, a student in Copenhagen. At his best, he is unrivalled among Icelandic poets for power and beauty of expression. Bibliography: *Ljóðmáli* (1847, 1884).

LINES TO SIGRÚN

You vexed me with your vainness
Of view just now, my Sigrún.
I bade you boldly seek me
If borne from life before me—
And falsely you affirmed then
That feebly I would kiss you,
Claimed that I would not clasp you
When cold and pale and shrouded.

The maiden surely mocks me:
Remembrance would be fleeting

If, as she feigns to fancy,
I'd fail to love her phantom.
Your lips as your own would linger
Though lacking warmth and sweetness;
Your cheeks would charm my vision
Though chill and white I saw them.

Clings not the snow, caressing,
To kiss the face of winter,
Even as scarlet sunshine
The summer-rose embraces?
Pale is the purest lily.
Pale are you as the snow-drift.
Must you be mantled poorly
Though mouth and cheeks grow pallid?

If blood of human blooming
Blench from your lips and vanish,
Breezes of deathless beauty
Would breathe on them still forever.
Fair as the face of angels
I'd find your cheeks unblemished,
As fresh and fine as I knew them
Though the flame of life were ashes.

Leave me not then, my loved one,
Alone in the world of sorrow
If you should flee before me
To the fold of eternal quiet.
Come when the frosts grow keener
Cold in the autumn gloaming!
Come when the moon of midnight
Is masking its face in fog-murk!

Then may that moon in mercy
Remove from its pallid forehead
Its veil, when I see you vivid,
A vision that smiles upon me.
Follow, O follow, my fair one!
Float on a cloud to claim me!
Touch me in tender pity
With the tips of your soft white fingers!

So when my ardor answers
And I open my arms to hold you,
Cast then your cold white bosom
Quickly upon my heart, dear!
Press on my pulses closely,
Press till your passion shall loosen
My soul from the flesh and its fetters
To follow you upward forever.

Then gladly we'll glide through the infinite spaces,
Kiss with the gleam of the night on our faces,
Ride the Aurora and swim its light-billows
Rosy as flames in a heaven of blisses,
Dance in the star-shine that floods the abysses,
And slumber in love on the clouds' snowy pillows.

NATIONAL ANTHEM

Land of primeval fire,
Home of the heart's desire,
Mountain-maid sweet,
Dear to thy sons thou'lt be
While shores are girt by sea,
While man makes love his plea,
While suns have heat.

'Mid Copenhagen's mists
Our homesick love persists,
 Longs for the north;
Harsh dins distract us here,
False joys attract us here,
Fools have attacked us here
 On Danish earth.

Weary of dull flat lands,
Weary of foggy strands,
 We sicken here;
Most ugly seems this place,
Lacking in every grace,
Dull as a noseless face
 With eyeless leer.

Ah, but far otherwise
Thy snow-capped peaks arise
 Splendid and high,
Or thy transparent streams
On which the sunlight beams
Where thy ice-bulwark gleams
 Against the sky.

Land of primeval fire,
Home of our heart's desire,
 Mountain-maid grand,
Glorious prosperity.
We all invoke for thee
Through all eternity,
 While earth shall stand.

From "Winter"

Who rides so rough
By the radiant bridge

That hangs from heaven
On a snow-white horse
Whose flowing mane
Is flecked with frost,
Whose feet strike fire
From the frozen flint?

He glitters in grisly
Grey-scarred corselet,
Clinging ice-cold
To his corpselike frame;
The wind wails cold
As he wields his weapon;
The wan lights wave
From his wintry helmet.

He has ridden from realms
Of raven night,
Where the world is weak
And the ways are wan;
None sports there in spring
Or in solace sweet
By the polar peaks
And the polar plains.

In ageless eld
He is older than earth,
More ancient than all
The eons of heaven;
As grey as the gods
He will grim endure
When the waning worlds
Shall have wasted away.

SVEINBJÖRN EGILSSON (1791-1852)

Born at Innri-Njardvík, but was reared from an early age by Magnús Stephensen at Videy. Graduated in divinity from the University of Copenhagen in 1819. Teacher in Bessastadir School 1819-1846 and rector of the new Reykjavik high school 1846-1851. He then retired, and died in the following year. He was a learned philologist, whose dictionary of the old poetic tongue, *Lexicon poeticum*, is the greatest achievement of any one man in Norse philology. He translated Homer's *Iliad* in prose and the *Odyssey* in both prose and verse. He and Jónas Hallgrímsson were the first in the nineteenth century to purify the modern Icelandic tongue and restore it to its ancient seat of honour. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1856), *Ilionskvíða* (1855), *Odysseifskvíða* (1829-40, 1912).

VITA VARIA

The golden dew-drops of the dawn
Shine not forever on the grass;
Birds' matin music is withdrawn;
The smiles of sea and meadow pass.
For God found fittest for the earth
The law that life
Blends peace and strife,
And placed that blessing on its birth.

The blizzard from the glacial peak
Falls not forever on the turf;

Nor is the north wind always bleak
To rack the soil and icy surf.
For God found fittest for the earth
The law that grief
Must find relief;
He laid that blessing on our birth.

So brows grow bright on happy days
When joy shines radiant in the face;
So sinks the sorrow-stricken gaze
When grief blots sunlight from the place.
For woe as swiftly disappears
As dews that pass
From morning grass,
Yet shall the night bring back its tears.

Dear brother, though the billows sweep
Upon thy vessel, falter not;
Calm days beyond the breakers sleep,
Rest shall reward the brave of thought.
Beneath the waves that crash or glide,
Cold heaves the great
Ground-swell of fate,
And man must sternly wait his tide.

HJÁLMAR JÓNSSON (1796-1875)

Born at Halland-on-Eyfjörður, son of a homeless unmarried mother and an unknown father. Adopted by a poor widow. He moved west to Skagafjörður in 1820, married, and lived as a destitute cotter until his death in 1875. He is sometimes called "Bólu-Hjálmar" after his little farm "Bólu." His was a life-long struggle against hardships of every sort. His neighbours were ignorant, malevolent, and contemptuous, but he met their insolence with the most slashing satire in all Icelandic. As Jochumsson puts it: "He shook a metal-knotted lash at a pitiless age of miserly meanness." He is one of the very greatest of Icelandic poets and his innate genius, handicapped at first by lack of education, grew steadily more and more effective through long years of rigorous self-culture. Bibliography (all posthumous): *Göngu-Hrólfo rímur* (1884), *Kvæði og Kviðlingar* (1888), *Tvennar rímur* (1905), *Ljóðmæli* (1915).

DEATH

Many friends uphold my might,
Shades of doom obscure the light,
I draw nigh, perhaps to-night,
With shattered shield, helm hacked in fight,
Deep-cloven corselet, shivered sword,
and hell's black blight.

THE PACKHORSE CARAVAN

Of valued trains, this is the least:
One bearing tools whose use has ceased,
A weary wife and a drunken priest,
A saucy slave and a spavined beast.

ON THE DEPARTURE OF THE HORSEMAN, SWAIN

Sailing now from Satan's slip,
Swain, the swindler, flying,
On his leaky chatter-ship
Rigs a helm of lying.

Boasts and bunkum are the swell
Underneath his boat.
Homeward to the port of hell
May she quickly float!

SIGURDUR BREIDFJÖRD (1798-1846)

Born at Rifgirdingi-on-Breidafjörður. Learned the cooper's trade in Copenhagen and was in the Danish mercantile service in Greenland, 1831-1834. A drifter, addicted to beer and poetry, he lived an unsettled life and died of starvation in Reykjavík in 1846. He was the greatest and best of the *rímur*-poets, and his work has enjoyed conspicuous popularity even down to the present. Imperfect education handicapped his natural genius in matters of technique and taste, but this is more than counter-balanced by the unflinching cheerfulness, virility, and humanity of his writings. Bibliography: *Núma rímur* (composed in Greenland, 1831-34, publ. 1835, 1903), *Ljóða smámunir*, 2 collections (1836, 1839, another edition 1911-1912), *Úrvalsrit* (selections, 1894).

IF I FIND A PIECE OF GOLD

If I find a piece of gold
Lying in the street,
And I do not pass it cold,
Who were more discreet?

If I find a pretty miss
Tinder to my flame,
And I do not take a kiss,
Surely I'm to blame!

No, I keep what cash I find,
Kiss each willing woman;
But where ownership's assigned,
I'll dispute with no man.

JÓNAS HALLGRÍMSSON (1807-1845)

Born at Hraun in Öxnadalur. Graduated from Bessastadir School in 1829. Studied natural science at the University of Copenhagen and spent several summers at field work in Iceland, preparing material for a book on the geography and natural history of the island. Untimely death at Copenhagen, 1845. One of the leaders of the Romantic Movement in Iceland, and helped to found its journal *Fjölmið* (1835), in which most of his literary work was published. His sympathetic treatment of nature introduced a new note into the national literature, while his tender Keatsian lyrics were full of rare charm. He and Bjarni Thórarensen were the Dioscuri of the poetic renaissance of the nineteenth century and each supplements the other in his qualities of spirit. Jónas Hallgrímsson is likewise important as a shaper of the modern literary language, purging it from excessive foreign borrowings, and moulding it into exquisite models of prose and verse. His influence on his successors was very great. Bibliography: *Kvæði* (1847, 1913), *Ljóðmæli og önnur rit* (1883).

GREETING

Now southern winds blow softly o'er the earth;
And all the sea-borne billows lessening rise,
Pressing in joy toward that fair Land of Ice,
The shores and shining forelands of my birth.

Oh, hail my home-folk with the voice of mirth
Across the hills and bays where beauty lies!
Blow warm, ye winds, on cheeks of glad surprise!
And kiss, ye waves, the sail-boat on the firth!

Dear harbinger of spring, O thrush most sweet,
Whose glistening pinions through the heights have sped
To bear thy song to far-off summer groves,

Salute in special, if you twain should meet,
An angel in a bonnet trimmed with red—
That is the lass my longing heart still loves.

THE GOLDEN PLOVER

Gay the little plover flew
Swooping up the morning blue,
Singing in the light:
"Praise the bounteousness of God!
See how green is every clod,
See how heaven is bright!

"On the heath I have a nest,
Where my little babies rest,
Waiting me at home;
Them my mother-love supplies
Tender worms and pretty flies,
When once more I come."

Home the little plover sped
(Radiant shone the sun o'erhead,
Sweet earth's flowery floor),
Laden sought her nestlings small—
But the crows had crunched them all
Half an hour before.

JÓN THORODDSEN (1819-1868)

Born at Reykhólar. Graduated from Bessastadir School in 1840; spent a long time in Copenhagen; fought in the Danish army in the Schleswig war of 1848; published his first novel, *Pilt og stúlku* (Boy and Girl) in 1850; and graduated in Danish law in 1854. He was a district magistrate in Iceland from that time until his death in 1868. Posthumously published were his poems (1871) and an unfinished novel, *Maður og Kona* (Man and Woman) (1876). He is the greatest novelist of Iceland, and his fiction has been translated into many languages. As a poet, his dominant mood is bitter satire, but some of his lyrics are tender and gay. Bibliography: *Kvæði* (1871, 1919).

ICELAND

O lovely is our fatherland
In radiant summer weather,
When leaves are green on every hand
And flocks are gay together.
Above the vale the blue crests rise
Athwart the sun's mild glory;
The meadows glisten to the skies;
The bay reflects the story.

Magnificent above it soar
The ice-peak's crystal spires,
On which the cloudless sunsets pour
A thousand golden fires;

While stars like sparks of flame are spread
Above the glacial levels,
And far-off rumblings overhead
Proclaim the fairy revels.

Thou native land, our love and pride,
Where all our sires are laid,
And where new buds find life beside
Their mouldering grave-stones' shade,
O blessed be thou ever found,
And blest each child of thine,
As long as grasses deck the ground,
As long as stars may shine!

SPRING SONG

Springtime is come to the spirit's long yearning;
Brooks are in flood from the heights of the hill;
Plover and swan to the tarns are returning;
Meadows resound to the thrushes' gay trill;
Islet and skerry grow bright in the sun;
Eider-ducks' courtship and nesting's begun;
Laughter of light on the hillsides is glancing;
Shepherds halloo to their flocks as they stray;
Lambs 'mid the flowery grasses are dancing;
Children are out in the meadows at play.

GRÍMUR THOMSEN (1820-1896)

Born at Bessastadir. Matriculated 1837, and studied æsthetics at the University of Copenhagen. Obtained his master's degree (and later his doctorate) for his book on Byron, 1845. He was long in the Danish diplomatic service, but obtained his release in 1866 and retired to Bessastadir, where he resided until his death in 1896. Grímur was widely read in the world's chief literatures, ancient and modern, and published a good many verse translations, especially from the Greek lyric poets and tragedians. In his original verse, however, he was strongly Icelandic, not only cultivating themes from national history and legend but recapturing with unusual success the strength and austerity of the older poetic tradition. This was in part due to the antique quality of his vocabulary, but it was more fundamentally the result of a temperamental affinity for the ancient school of Norse literature. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1880, 1895, 1906), *Rímur af Búa Andriðssyni og Friði Doðradóttur* (1906).

THE CREMATION OF SHELLEY

In sea-spray they lifted the body to land,
Redeemed from the breakers' fierce drag,
And reared from the wreckage that lay on the sand
A pyre on the crest of the crag.

They laid him upon it; the fire burned bright,
As bright as the spirit now gone
Unbound from the body to regions of light,
The joys of the deathless to own.

No funeral sermon was held there in calm:

Loud waves tolled the knell, deep and free;
And the voice of the storm sang the funeral psalm
To the organ-response of the sea.

The flames crackled fierce:— All thy charms disappear,
Thou flower of life here below.

O vanity, all is but vanity here,
As Solomon found long ago!

In silence they stood and stared long at the fire,
Till the blaze had gone utterly out;
And many a tear mourned that great mortal's pyre,
And many a heart grew devout.

BENEDIKT GRÖNDAL SVEINBJARNARSON
(1826-1907)

Born at Bessastadir. Named after his maternal grandfather, Judge Benedikt Gröndal. Matriculated 1846 and studied natural science and literature at the University of Copenhagen. Interrupted his course for several years, but at last took his master's degree in Norse philology in 1863. Made his living in Copenhagen by journalism, 1863-1873. Teacher in the Latin school at Reykjavík, 1874-1883. Then lived in retirement until his death in 1907. He was a man of great versatility, who translated the *Iliad* into Icelandic verse and wrote original poems in the grand style on classical, Biblical, and Old Norse themes. His poetry, however, is inclined to be florid and amorphous, embodying some of the graver defects of Romanticism, and is inferior to his prose work in literature and natural science. His prose satire has real salt. Bibliography: *Kvæðabók* (1900), *Dagrun* (1906).

MY NATIVE TONGUE

Sweet hast thou sung of Iceland's mountains
And sweet of Iceland's glacier strand,
Taught beside Odin's epic fountains,
Born in the noble Northern land!
There ancient kings received from thee
The accents of thy poetry.

Sometimes like heavy-clouded thunder
Thou flashest through the murk of thought;

Sometimes like zephyrs' gentle wonder
Thou hast with summer blossoms wrought;
Whatever moves the poet's heart
Thou canst express with grace and art.

As I sat, sweetly dreaming, after
A summer-sunset, bright and long,
Beside the ocean's ageless laughter,
I thrilled to hear an ancient song
And far-off bards their lays recite,
Touching the heart-strings to delight.

I seemed to see great Egil standing
Before King Eric's bloody throne,
While sun-fierce looks of reprimanding
Upon the captive suppliant shone;
And still the dauntless poet said
A Song of Ransom for his head.

Sad is thy soul in earth's fierce ocean,
Weak with the greater tongues to vie,
Little for thee the world's devotion,
Yet shall thy message never die:
The great white virgin of the heights
Swaddled thy birth in Northern Lights.

Yea, thou wert wrapped in vasty veils,
Hovered about by mountain-graces,
Close to a small folk's little dales,
Cradled with runes in silent places.
O great white virgin of the heights,
Swathe still thy child in Northern Lights!

AUTUMN

South on the moor a curlew sings
The flowers' requiem.
The poignant sweetness of its voice
Is fit farewell to them.

Ah, little heath-bird, notes of heav'n
Are mingled with thy lay!
I listen silently to thee,
And cannot turn away.

IN ABSENCE

I sit forsaken in the evening chill
And gaze upon the girdling silver seas
Now rising with the rising southern breeze
Beyond the bay where dim blue waves lie still.
All hail, fair wind, and hail, thou radiant light
That bringest hope beyond the darkening west!
And hail to thee thou fairest maid and best,
Who now art hid behind the hills of night!
Ah, maiden, I shall guard thee in my thought
And ever hold thee close in memory,
Thou tender sweetheart I have loved so long.
With thee my midnight dreams are warmly fraught;
And when the sun at dawning calls to me,
My waking heart-strings worship thee with song.

GÍSLI BRYNJÚLFSSON (1827-1888)

Born at Holmar on Reydarfjörður in East Iceland, the son of a clergyman. Studied at Bessastadir School and at the University of Copenhagen. From 1874 until his death in 1888 he was professor of Icelandic literature and history in his alma mater. He was a learned man and a great linguist, but although he wrote verse in four languages and translated from at least a dozen, there is a wooden quality about most of his work which reveals the scholar who is not a poet. In his art and thought he was influenced much more by foreign poets such as Byron than by the native Icelandic tradition. The following brief poem shows the genuine emotion of the homesick Iclander abroad. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1891).

VERSES

Purple hills, you beckon me—
Where blue rivers glide
And the grasses greener be
Down the gulch's side.
Crofts and crags are whispering low;
Valleys call me home;
Gladly would I turn and go,
Seek the glacier's dome.

Laughing waves bring no delight
On this alien shore,
Though the voice that they recite
Is their voice of yore;

Sure, I want the craggy steeps
Washed by waves of home:
Purple peaks and surging deeps,
Bless you! Yes, I come.

PÁLL ÓLAFSSON (1827-1905)

Born at Dvergastein-on-Seydisfjörður. He had no formal education and spent most of his life at Hallfredarstadir as farmer and steward. He was a typical unschooled peasant poet, and perhaps the best of that class in Iceland. He has been described as exceedingly slow of speech, but very witty and deadly in retort. He composed many beautiful love-songs addressed to his wife, Ragnhildur. He also left behind many humorous poems which every Icelander knows by heart. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli*, 2 vols. (1899-1900).

LIFE IS LIKE A LEAKY BOAT

Life is like a leaky boat,
Oars have rotted through,
Weary now the helmsman's throat,
Weary are the crew.

So 'tis best to wind the net,
Cease from toiling breath,
Let the drifting course be set
For the sands of death.

There upon the purple shore
Breaks the sullen foam;
Yet beyond the billow's roar
I've a welcome home.

COULD YOU EVER GUESS?

Could you ever guess, lass,
What I'd like to be?
The flowers that you press, lass,
Walking carelessly;
A limpid summer pool, lass,
Where you bathe in glee,—
There your foot I'd cool, lass,
And most tenderly
Kiss your snowy knee.

Could you ever dream, lass,
Where I'd like to dwell?
In your heart supreme, lass,
Sure you loved me well.
And if death should slay you, lass,
Homeless would I wander;
Time would ne'er betray you, lass,
Years could never squander
Love I'd ever ponder.

THE HAPPY VALLEY

I intend to slip away
To our Happy Valley,
Where the sun is ever gay,
Where no dark clouds dally:
There all hearts are always light,
Gladness comes to greet me,
There no winter, snow, or night
Ever dares to meet me.

See how radiant is the land
In rosy sunlight gleaming!

Let thy loving eye expand
O'er all the valley dreaming!
See the waters, silver-white
Where flocks of swans are oaring;
See the glittering mountain-height
Above the green slopes soaring.

See the leas and uplands flash,
Set with golden flowers;
See the groves of mountain-ash,
Where the cliff-side towers
Far beyond the leafy reach
Of the oak-tree's summit,
Far beyond the touch of each
Drifting smoke-wreath's plummet.

Down the dark-blue precipice
Falls the foaming river,
Gulch and grove in thunderous hiss
Laugh and groan and quiver.
Here is light and peace and calm,
Life and birds' rejoicing;
Here I find my spirit's balm,
Here thy dreams come poisoning.

I have a Vale of Happiness,
The world cannot behold it,
Its secret ways no one may guess,
My heart will ne'er unfold it.
No others walk its shady grove
Or come its streams to gaze on,
Because that Valley of our Love
Is far too dear to blazon.

THAT I TAKE WHICH IS MY OWN

Glad I sit beside thy bed,
Watching blushes overspread
Thy white cheek in joy sincere
Just because I'm sitting here.

That I take which is my own—
Whispers from thy fond lips blown,
And the tangled curls that float
O'er thy snowy breast and throat.

That I take which is my own—
Countless kisses fiercely strown
On thy lips, and arms, and breast
Where thy heart throbs out its quest.

That I take which is my own—
The crown of love on passion's throne,
Giv'n with glances madly sweet,
Pledges I could ne'er repeat.

That I take which is my own:
Plenty lies in thee alone,
Purest love and plighted hand.
Here I have not built on sand.

STEINGRÍMUR THORSTEINSSON (1831-1913)

Born at Arnarstapi-on-Snæfellsnes, son of a senior magistrate. Studied philology at the University of Copenhagen and graduated in 1863. Taught 1872-1913 in the College of Iceland at Reykjavík where he was successively junior master, senior master, and rector. Steingrímur was a versatile scholar who enriched Icelandic literature by many translations from foreign tongues, including Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, *The Arabian Night's Entertainments*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and much of Byron. His original poetry, which is very popular, includes many sagacious epigrams, witty satires, and graceful lyrics of love and nature. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1881, 1893, 1910, 1925).

BLUE EYES

Of all things blue, my sweetheart dear,
The best is in thy glance sincere;
No sky such glorious blue has got;
So blue is no forget-me-not.

What gave those eyes their happy hue
That holds and draws all men to you?—
Thy loving heart, thy honest call,
Thy heart that thinks no guile at all.

MUSIC

Move gently now, sweet angel-speech of song,
And soothe the sorrows that my spirit throng!
 Thy tear-soft rain of tone
 Is trembling downward, sown
 As down the dale
 The dews avail
To drench the drought-sick rose.

Tender as twittering love-birds in a wood,
Mighty as murmuring ocean at its flood,
 O heavenly strain, play on!
 My spirit, like a swan,
 Is borne on streams
 Of blessed dreams
To the sea of thy silver sound.

WHERE ARE THE BIRDS?

Where are the song-birds of the summer vanished?
 They fled o'er southern surf-capes long ago.
Where are the blossoms of the June fields banished?
 They lie in their dark graves beneath the snow.

Hushed is all song except the chill wind chanting
 Over the snowy fields and on the shore,
Stirring the silent sea-fowl with its ranting,
 Rocking the headlands with its hollow roar.

Gone are all flowers except the death-pale petals
 Painted by frosts upon the frozen pane,
And, where blue ice-fields gleam like mirrored metals,
 Flowers of magic in a moonlight-lane.

No, life of song and flower now finds its dwelling
 Within the home, protected from the storm,
Nurtured with love and song and story-telling
 Where bright hearth-blazes shed their radiance warm.

Far to the south the song-birds are delaying;
 Deep under snowy shrouds dead flowers lie;
Within, the spirit keeps its summer playing;
 Without are dreary drifts and iron sky.

MATTHÍAS JOCHUMSSON (1835-1920)

Born at Skógar-on-Thorskafjörður. Originally intended for a business career, he entered university in 1863 and graduated in divinity at the age of 30. He was clergyman at Kjalarnes for six years but lost his wife and in his grief travelled abroad for some time. He was editor of *Þjóðólfur*, 1874-1880, minister at Oddi till 1886, and at Akureyri until his superannuation in 1900. On his 85th birthday he was made an honorary Doctor of Divinity by the University of Reykjavík and an honorary citizen of Akureyri. Matthías was the chief poet of Iceland for half a century, both in quality and in quantity. In commemorative poetry he has no rival except Bjarni Thórarensen. He stood apart from all schools and tendencies, displaying rather a catholicity of interest and sympathy which could embrace both man and nature, Iceland and the world. Among his writings are several plays which have been very popular. He translated four plays of Shakespeare, Byron's *Manfred*, Tegnér's *Frithiof's Saga*, and much from other poets. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1884, 1902-06); *Úrval* (1915); *Grettisljóð* (1897).

The significance of the poem *Drift Ice* lies in the fact that the north of Iceland is beleaguered with ice floes each winter and in some years in history (e.g. 1233 and 1261) the whole island has been hemmed in all year by a drifting sea of ice, resulting in famine and great suffering.

A PSALM OF PRAISE

God of our land, our country's God,
We praise Thy hallowèd, hallowèd name!
The heavens have woven the sun and stars

To make Thee a crown of flame!
A day before Thee is a thousand years
And a thousand years as a brief day lies,
A flower of the infinite, touched with tears,
That worships its God and dies.

Iceland's thousand years—
A flower of the infinite, touched with tears,
That worships its God and dies.

O God, our God, we now bow down;
We offer the gift of a heart on fire;
Our Father and Lord from age to age,
We praise Thee in pure desire;
We praise Thee and thank Thee a thousand years
Since Thou art our refuge alone;
We praise Thee and thank Thee, touched with tears,
For the times of our fate are Thine own.

Iceland's thousand years
Are a dark cold morning of trickling tears
That warm when Thy sun has shone.

God of our land, our country's God,
Our lives are grass and they wither away;
We perish, except as Thy light and life
Shall raise us from out the clay;
O be Thou each morning the hope we call,
Our guide through the day's dull need,
Our rest and shelter when shadows fall,
The Lord who our land shall lead;

Iceland's thousand years
Grant thou to prosper, and dry its tears
In Thy kingdom's growth indeed!

MY MEMORY SOUGHT YOU

My memory sought you when the morning sun
 Made bright the sea.
Like morning-light on my sad mind arose
 Your memory.

My memory sought you when the sunlight sank,
 And summer died.
Into the gulf of grief remembrance fell,
 Its groans to hide.

My memory sought you when the days were mild
 And mirth was deep.
My memory sought you when harsh misery
 Had made you weep.

My memory sought you when the ways grew wan.
 A web of love
Out of the sorrow in my silent heart
 I sat and wove.

My memory ever sought you, though in scorn
 You soon forgot.
But even in the grave's dark gulf my soul
 Forgets you not.

EPITHALAMIUM

When man first gazed upon a maid's
 Sweet mystery,
Then first came light and laughter down
 On land and sea.

When Adam bowed in low amaze
To that sweet elf,
Then first he learned to bend his brow
To heaven itself.

And when that first of husbands held
Eve's soft white hand,
He saw all life inside his grasp
By sea and land.

And when Eve first in ardor gazed
In Adam's eyes,
Then first the opening flowers raised
Their fragrant sighs.

And when her tongue began to tell
Its gracious tales,
Then birds began their silver songs
In summer dales.

And when their bodies first embraced
In bridal bed,
Then holy dews from the wing of heaven
In hope were shed.

And who may state, since custom stales
Our strength to write,
How heaven and sea and earth all drank
Their health that night?

DRIFT ICE

Art thou come, our country's ancient foeman?
Thou wert ever first, for no man
Nor the sun nor ship beat thee to shore.

Silver fleet thou sailst for our tormenting.
See the ice-hag, Helja, unrelenting
Grasping from thy prow with dearth-plates hoar!
Mother Sea with freezing belly bending
Tugs in terror at her icy chains,
Groans aghast to feel her entrails rending,
Like a monster in its travail-pains.

Where is Ocean? Where her belt of blue,
Bright, brushed with silver hue?
Art thou lost, beloved source of life?
Then from babies' lips the breast is taken,
Bear and fox both scent the snow forsaken,
Hungry gnaw old carrion without strife.
Peace and prowess and fair days are ended;
Valor, strength, and genius lost from sight;
All our darkest dreads are now transcended;
Death comes, and the dead gods' night.

Thou, sea-ice, hast all that can dismay us,
All that seeks to hurt and slay us.
Should we lack the heat of fortitude,
Fornjot's pale and icy wraith would hasten
Fetters of a thousand years to fasten;
Deeply hast thou drunk of Iceland's blood.
Whence art thou? For no one knows thy dwelling;
None knows where thy home and kindred are;
Outer, inner warmth thou art dispelling—
Thou are surely from afar.

Deep within my heart thy breath of hating
Poison-cold is penetrating,
Round life's root the Midgard-serpent gnaws.
Countless thousand shafts of light are shaking,
Countless thousand rays of radiance quaking,
Frightened at the darkness of thy jaws.

In the sun the lava-fields grow livid;
Mighty birches fear the levin-storm;
But thy savage power grows still more vivid,
Nothing can do thee harm.

Lodestone-land, what sprites in thee conspire,
Bright with the flames of heaven's ire,
Round the North's white glacial throne?
Do the grim Grey Sisters wait to shut
Gasping mouths they doom with death to glut?
Bears their wheel our fortune with a groan?
Is a rune there carved upon the rock
In the tongue of gods, a mystic key?
Do vast symbols in that sky unlock
All the riddles of earth's mystery?

No one answers. For thy deeps are clouded,
With death's mantle darkly shrouded,
Hid with life's mysterious veil of grace.
Surely thou hast some great undertaking
Ordered for thy thousand years of waking;
But the ways of God we cannot trace.
Does thy power, perhaps, press towards revealing
Silent life and fire's hidden breath,
Touching sterile foam to health and healing,
Keeper of life and king of death?

BRYNJÓLFUR JÓNSSON (1838-1914)

Born at Minni-Núpur, Arnessýsla. Self-taught. Made his living chiefly by teaching. For many years spent his summers in archæological research. Bibliography: *Skuggsjá og ráðgáta* (1875); *Kvæði* (1889).

TRIBUTE TO ICELAND

(*For the celebration of 1874*)

From a thousand years of story
One day passes full of glory,
One day whose fame shall never die,
The dawning of our people's life—
Here where ancestral deeds were rife—
Which rises now in history's sky
And shining on this sprout
Once more brings leafage out.
O Icelanders!
Invoke Him then
Who makes us men
And gives our freedom back again!

The shining day may rain-clouds bring
As on a sun-shower day of spring
To fructify the ancient root
And lure the buds to meet the breeze,
And here across these northern seas
Come sun and shower to nurse the shoot.

So grows the race's sprout,
And soon brings blossoms out.
O Icelanders!
Now bless with tears
The One who hears
And crowns our country's thousand years!

Behold across the flaming west
The vanished sun's far-flung bequest
Of golden weather yet to be!
The festal day is touched with red,
A symbol of the promise shed
On our millennial destiny.
But still must shower and shine
Refresh our ancient line.
O Icelanders!
Petition straight
The Lord of fate
To make our morrows truly great!

KRISTJÁN JÓNSSON (1842-1869)

Born at Krossdalur-on-Kelduhverfi. Was a farm laborer until the age of 22, when his poetry, published in newspapers, led to his being sent to high school. After a short time he became a school-teacher at Vopnafjörður but died there at the age of 27. He was unquestionably a great poet by nature but brevity of life and lack of early training stunted his performance. Melancholy broods over his lines but many of his lyrics achieved rare beauty and his collected works have passed through four editions. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1872, 1890, 1907, 1911).

THE TEAR

Thou blessed spring of cool delight,
O silver-shining tear,
Thou healest many a human blight
With ministry sincere.

And vanish not from out my eye,
Thou tear of lovers' joy!
Thou tenderest sorrow's tragedy
When heart-break would destroy.

A light within my heart appears
Whene'er the tear-drops fall;
I think that God must count my tears
And bless me through them all.

VALDIMAR BRIEM (*born* 1848)

Born at Grund, Eyjafjardarsýsla. Graduate of the Latin School and the Theological School. Minister of Hrepphólar and Stóri Núpur since 1873. Dean of Árnessýsla since 1897. Vice-bishop of Skálholt diocese since 1909. The greatest of Icelandic hymn-writers since Hallgrímur Pétursson, and one of the most liberal of recent theologians. He is best known for his poetic renderings of incidents in Scripture. Bibliography: *Barnasálmur* (1893); *Bibliljóð* (2 vols., 1896-97); *Davíð sálmar í íslenskum sálmabúningi* (1898); *Kristin barnafræði í ljóðum* (1906); *Ljóð úr Jobsbók* (1908).

GOD IN HIS UNIVERSE

O God, this ambient world in low and high
Is like an open book that tells of Thee;
Yes, every petal of the flowers shy
Is as a page that bears Thy great decree.

The morning sun that rises in the east
Directs me to Thy heavenly light above;
Its sunset fingers, when the day has ceased,
Still beckon me to rest within Thy love.

When radiant spring arouses earth to life,
It kindles hope of Thee within my breast;
When autumn follows, with its darkling strife,
I find in Thee a refuge for the oppressed.

The countless stars that gleam across the night
Speak of Thine eyes, that slumber not at all;
The lowliest flowers of the field endite
That Thou in all things dwellest, great and small.

The storm that rages sternly o'er the land
Proclaims with strong voice Thine omnipotence;
And when the earth by gentle airs is fanned,
We feel the grace of Thy benevolence.

The lucid fire that burns with cheerful flame
Instructs us plainly that Thy heart is warm;
The spring that flows unfailingly the same
Shows us Thy mercy, fresh and uniform.

When happy birds make loud the air with song,
They praise Thy glory over land and sea;
When panting stags their sobbing sighs prolong,
They shadow forth our anxious search for Thee.

Then grant me, God, Thy works to gaze upon!
For they have ever been my heart's delight;
And though Thy majesty my flesh may stun,
My soul goes soaring towards Thy mercy's height.

JÓN ÓLAFSSON (1850-1916)

Brother of Páll Ólafsson. Born Kolfreyjustadur, Sudur-Múlasýsla. Student in the College of Iceland, 1863-68. Became so ardent an advocate of Icelandic independence from Denmark that Danish officials compelled him to leave the island for America in 1873. In 1874 he was sent to Alaska by President Grant to investigate the possibility of setting up an Icelandic colony there, but the project proved an abortive one. The sonnet here given in translation was written during his stay in Alaska. He returned to Iceland in 1875 and engaged in journalism for about fifteen years. From 1890 to 1894 he was an editor in Winnipeg, and from 1894 to 1897 he was in library work in Chicago. The remainder of his life was spent in Iceland, where he was active in public life. His bibliography is very extensive, including an Icelandic dictionary and over a dozen other books, but his only volume of poetry was *Söngvar og kvæði* (pub. 1877, 3rd edition, 1896).

ALASKA

I rest in cooling shadows of the pines
On softest grasses by the ocean-shore;
The heart finds solace from its sad designs
In bird-song and the sea-waves muffled roar.

It seems to me I know this cliff of old,
It seems to me my exile is forgot,
It seems to me a wanderer could behold
A welcome home on this majestic spot.

But near at hand debauchery most foul
Breaks in upon the beauty of the wild
And mars the quiet of the wilderness—

Not here, Alaska, where the sin-hounds howl,
Will any exiled, lorn Icelandic child
Find home and fosterland for his distress.

GESTUR PÁLSSON (1852-1891)

Born at Midhús in Reykhólasveit. Studied at the University of Copenhagen, where, like Thorsteinn Erlingsson and others, he came under the influence of Georg Brandes and the realistic school in literature. From 1882 to 1890, he lived in Reykjavík and was editor of *Sudri* (1883-87) the new journal of the realistic movement. He then moved to Winnipeg as editor of *Heimskringla*, but died the next year, 1891. Most of his work was fiction, in which the dominating elements were pessimism and a bitterly satirical attack on hypocrisy and insincerity. Bibliography: *Ritsafn* (Collected works, 1927). The following poem is taken from one of his letters.

I

I'm a heart-weary hawk that goes fluttering by,
A flying cloud, borne in the storm-wind on high,
A zephyr astray on the sea's grieving breast
That wakefully searches forever for rest.

I'm a snow-slide that falls on a midwinter hill
And sinks down forever, forgotten and still,
A shooting-star flung through the measureless dome,
A weeping lost spirit that searches for home.

STEPHAN G. STEPHANSSON (1853-1927)

Born at Kirkjuhóll-on-Skagafjörður, a farm since deserted. Emigrated to America at the age of 20, roughing it as a pioneer and settling successively in Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Alberta. Here he showed himself a capable and industrious farmer, but an early interest in poetry was also preserved. A small library, laboriously gathered and affectionately studied, nourished in him an unusual gift of expression. No other Icelandic poet has a richer or more copious vocabulary, and his themes, drawn largely from prairie life and from Icelandic tradition, are treated with the mastery of a great artist. He has even been claimed as the greatest poet in all of the British Dominions. Some of his poems are gnarled and difficult, but they all bear the impress of a strong masculine genius. In 1917 he visited Iceland and was given a royal reception. He died on his farm in 1927. Bibliography: *Andvökur*, 5 vols., I-III (1909-1910), IV-V (1923); *Kolbeinslag* (1914); *Vigslóði* (1920).

REMEMBRANCE

Though you have trodden in travel
All the wide tracts of the earth,
Bear yet the dreams of your bosom
Back to the land of your birth,
Kin of volcano and floe-sea!
Cousin of geyser and steep!
Daughter of downland and moorland!
Son of the reef and the deep!
High over heaven and landscape,
Haunting your thought as it strays,

Torrents and towering summits
Tremble once more to your gaze,
Far in the outermost ocean
The isle of your heart is awake,
Shining in shadowless summer,
Showered with light for your sake.

Vivid that Icelandic vision
Viewed in your dreams as they run—
Granite rocks growing with flowers,
Glaciers warm in the sun,
O kin of volcano and floe-sea,
Cousin of geyser and steep,
Daughter of downland and moorland,
Son of the reef and the deep.

NORTHERN PRAIRIE

By prairie and slough-side the train that we rode
Drove ever relentlessly north.
To our left the great River lay turbid and red
And sprawled itself sullenly forth.
Its breast never quickened in rapid or fall,
Its dull heavy waters were fain
To waddle forever with arms full of mud
And the slummocky clay of the plain.
The landscape unchanged and unchangeable stood,
Save only where dryads of grace
Had woven on edges of wandering brooks
A leafy embroid'ry of lace;
But the land itself lay like an infinite board,
Unslivered, unknotted, and clean,
As if all the stuff of Creation were smoothed
And stained an ineffable green.

SVEINBJÖRN BJÖRNSSON (*born 1854*)

Born at Narfakoti, Vatnsleysustrand, Gullbringusýsla. An auto-didact. A poet of the people, finding his inspiration in the national life. Still quite active after 75 years of toil. Bibliography: *Hillingar* (1914); *Ljóðmæli* (1924).

KNOWST THOU A LAND?

Knowst thou a land of purple mountain-passes?
There Northern Lights pour forth a glimmering river
Above the snow-still glacial morasses,
Branching in frosty flames that dart and quiver;
While deep beneath all ice and craggy spire
Throbs the fierce heart-beat of primeval fire.

KRISTINN STEFÁNSSON (1856-1916)

Born at Egilsá, Skagafjardarsýsla. Emigrated to Canada in 1873, settling first at Rosseau, in the Muskoka district of Ontario, and removing to Winnipeg in 1884. A carpenter by trade. Moved to Gimli, Manitoba, in 1911, but died in Winnipeg in 1916. Bibliography: *Vestan hafs, ýmisleg ljóðmæli* (1900); *Út úr vötn og velli* (posthumously, 1916).

NOVEMBER NIGHTS

The autumn's end on wings of snow-winds nearing
Engraves upon the ground a rune that blights.
The naked knolls are touched with frosty-searing
November nights.

Aloft they raise their storm-tents in the heights
And gird the north for winter's stern appearing,
Clad in cold majesty of Northern Lights.

Dead leaves a-down the chilling stream are steering;
A hand of death at all things living smites,
With broken skeletons the dusk besmearing—
November nights!

THORSTEINN ERLINGSSON (1858-1914)

Born at Stórumörk-under-Eyjafjall. Entered the University of Copenhagen in 1883 and fell under the influence of Georg Brandes and his circle, becoming a realist in art and a Socialist in politics. Left university for a literary career and struggled long with poverty and ill health. After 1890 his work began to attract attention. He returned home to Iceland in 1895 and after eight years of journalism was granted a small poet's allowance by the Althing. He then settled in Reykjavík and supplemented his stipend by tutoring. He died in 1914. Thorsteinn is important both for ideas and for art. He assailed hypocrisy and tyranny wherever he thought he saw them in church and state, and expressed matchless sympathy and tenderness for the weak and wretched of the world. He is the Swinburne of Icelandic literature, aglow with fierce enthusiasm for a new age. As with Swinburne, too, all that he touched turned to music, for he brought to Icelandic poetry an enhanced ideal of laboriously achieved exquisiteness in expression. Both in thought and technique, his influence has been profound. Bibliography: *Þyrrnar* (1897, 1905, 1918); *Eiðurinn* (selected poems, 1913, 1925).

MY TERMS

If you fear not to see all fiends
 Rise up in wrath,
While rolled in dust lies every rank
 This old world hath,
And hacked in sunder every pillar
 That bears the sky—
Then shall I sing my song with you,
 Be your ally.

If you can hate the lord who binds
 You cruelly,
Who forces men to his proud self
 To bend the knee,
While trembling slaves where'er he goes
 Praise his estate—
Then shall I gladly join your cause,
 Hate whom you hate.

If you love him who laughs at bars
 And shakes his bands,
And will not basely kneel to kiss
 The tyrant's hands,
But bravely walks in fettered pride
 His doom to prove—
Then I with all my heart applaud,
 Love whom you love.

If you the key to life are still
 Intent on winning,
And in fate's Primer you begin
 At the beginning,
And read no sentence wrongly there
 Through others' eyes—
Then shall I gladly read with you
 In kindred wise.

If you direct your destiny
 To one fixed aim,
And keep the hard, unswerving path
 That most men blame,
And let no barrier hinder you,
 Whate'er forbode—
Then shall I gladly walk with you
 That stony road.

If you still hold your course across
 The stormiest sea,
Yet have no cheap insurance in
 Eternity,
And boldly let your boat rush on
 By rock and reef—
Then shall I gladly sail with you
 And your belief.

And when at last the livid night
 Sinks darkly o'er
Your tossing ship, and in that deep
 There is no shore,
If then you calmly let it drift
 That course unbuoyed—
I shall most gladly face with you
 The Stygian void.

THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH

If thou wouldst build high, dearest friend, yet stand fast,
 Nor fall in thy brave undertaking,
Then hazard the dearest possession thou hast,
 To favor thy fate in the making.
Still set all thy hopes on the harvest to be,
 Have faith in the future's successes,
And fear not the spirit of him who would see
 The venture of all he possesses.

No doubt it is best to be sturdy and great
 To rid a new road of its boulders;
Yet be not dismayed at thy arm's feeble state,
 Just square to the task with thy shoulders.

The highways of life in the ages gone by
Were surely carved out by the strong,
But there's work for the weak who are willing to try
In smoothing the road for the throng.

Then stop not at all, though the way be austere,
And great men speak falsehoods of folly;
If youth greets thy work with a handshake of cheer,
Thy mission may flout melancholy.
If age hems thee close in the gambit of days,
Just double the zest of the playing;
'Tis only when Age gives thy purposes praise
That life in thy veins is decaying.

JÓN THORKESSON (1859-1924)

Born at Ásar in Skaptártunga. Took his doctorate from the University of Copenhagen in 1888, his dissertation, *On the poetry of Iceland in the 15th and 16th centuries*, being pioneer research work of striking importance. At work on Icelandic manuscript material in Denmark until 1898, when he returned to Iceland as director of the National Archives at Reykjavík. One of the very greatest of Icelandic historians. Founder and editor of the monthly *Sunnanfari*. One of the founders of the Icelandic Historical Society. His poetry was fugitive in character, but was collected in one volume, *Visnakver* (1923), and published under the pen-name "Fornólfur."

ON HEADLONG HEIGHTS

On Headlong Heights I oft have lingered
And watched the gale sweep down the ocean,
And squall-driv'n breakers in commotion
Assail the sea-coast, fury-fingered.

On Mermaid Mountain I have wondered
To see the wild witch-waves assembled;
The very summit rocked and trembled
When toppling rollers broke and thundered.

JÓN RUNÓLFSSON (*born 1859*)

Born in the northeast of Iceland. Emigrated to Minnesota at the age of 20, and two years later went north to Winnipeg. After varied employment, he became a school-teacher among the Icelandic colonists in 1889 and followed that profession for the next 30 years. His best work lies in the field of verse translation. His single volume, *þögul leiftur* (1924), contains a masterful version of Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*.

A NIGHT OF FROST

When suns of spring shine soft and glad
And waken all the grass of earth,
And opening blossoms burst to birth,
And hills in fragrant peace are clad,
I have, alas, in hours of mirth
By moonlight o'er the meadows straying
Beheld a frost-killed bud displaying
The pallor of its stricken dearth.

And though with dawning came a flood
Of conquering light for joyous hours,
One answer failed those radiant powers—
The kiss of death was on that bud.
Fair fragrance breathed from meads and bowers,
And laughing babes sweet wreaths were twining,
But who would mark one blossom pining
When life and summer bathe in flowers?

It yields no breath, it bears no bloom,
Its beauty vanished like a dream;
And yet within its stem the stream
Of warm life pulses in the gloom.
Come little friend, my heart can deem
Your sorrow though none else revere it—
The kiss of death is on my spirit
No matter how alive I seem.

EINAR HJÖRLEIFSSON KVARAN (*born 1859*)

Born at Vallanes, East Iceland. Studied at the University of Copenhagen, 1881-1885. Then he migrated to Canada, where he spent ten years in Winnipeg and ultimately became editor of the newspaper *Lögberg*. Returned to Iceland and has been successively joint editor of *Ísafold* (Reykjavík), 1895-1901; editor of *Nordurland* (Akureyri), 1901-1904; editor of *Fjallkona* (Reykjavík), 1904-1906; and editor of *Morgun* (Reykjavík) since 1920. For the past two decades he has, however, been receiving a poet's "Civil List" stipend from the government and has devoted most of his time to purely literary work. He is pre-eminently a novelist, portraying the neglected children of life with sympathy and insight. Some of his short stories are among the best in the language. His poems, chiefly to be found in the volume *Ljóðmæli* (1893), are few in number but carefully wrought. The following examples are based, as children will recognize at once, on familiar themes from the *Arabian Nights*.

SINBAD'S SIXTH VOYAGE

So Sinbad was borne o'er the frowning sea
To a doom of shipwrecked groans:
His craft was crushed in misery
On the Coast of Dead Men's Bones.

Then he trusted a raft to the river's swell,
To better his hopeless plight,
Through a cave as black as the pit of hell
And dim as the darkest night.

Then he swooned away with exhausted sigh
In that hideous cave of death—
But he drifted through to a sunlit sky
And a laughing, flower-strewn heath.

I, too, must be shipwrecked on the coasts of woe
And be borne on a Stygian tide
Down the pitchy tunnel where all men go—
But what of the other side?

THE KING OF THE BLACK ISLES

A tale has often moved me much :
A king sat, robed complete,
But from his waist down, cold to touch,
Black marble to his feet.

Yet he was born to high renown,
A valiant monarch he ;
The splendors of his mighty crown
Had awed an empery.

A loving spouse's warm embrace
Was his by easy right,
For he was beautiful of face
And free from guile and spite.

Like the morning sun he should have shone
Upon assemblies fair ;
But stillness lay about his throne,
Stark silence brooded there.

And pale despond had come to rack
This prince of fellowship :
A base enchantress flayed his back
Each evening with a whip.

His heart was fired with hate and grief ;
He constantly made moan ;
But never could he find relief,
Because his feet were stone.

To Araby, long long ago,
A thousand years, they say,
This tale of fantasy we owe.
But it happens every day.

HANNES HAFSTEIN (1861-1922)

Born at Möðruvellir in Horgardalur. Graduated in law from the University of Copenhagen in 1886. He was land-secretary, 1889-1895, district magistrate in the Ísafjörður district till 1904, and a senator of Iceland, 1904-1909 and 1912-1914. He died in 1922 after a lengthy illness. As a poet, he was precocious, writing excellent lyrics at the age of 20. His poetry was always fresh and bracing, full of sunlit cheerfulness and humanity and untouched by the pessimistic malaise of his time. In later years, as his energies were absorbed by the practical issues of government, his poetic output dwindled greatly. Bibliography: *Ýmisleg ljóðmæli* (1893), *Ljóðabók* (1916, 1925).

The following poem is a tribute to Gullfoss ("the golden cataract"), on Hvítá ("the white river"), in the southwest of the island. This waterfall, 150 feet in height, gains its name from its color in the sunshine. It is one of the most beautiful cataracts in the world.

GULLFOSS

Human song is slight,
Weakens and is gone;
Deathless is the might
Of the torrent's tone,
Singing till the precipices tremble,
Singing till the rocks are hurled below,
Singing till the sun's own rays dissemble,
Shattering to the magic of the bow.

From the mountain crest,
Fronting heaven's dome,
Bold it bares its breast,
Blue beneath the foam ;
Waves grow rounded like an athlete's sinews
As that splendor leaps into the strife.
Hear, the epic thunder still continues,
Bellowing deep-voiced judgment upon life.

Mad the maelstrom flies,
Furious as to fight,
Waves like arrows rise,
Sink as swift as light,
Tossing up bright mists of opalescence,
Water-sprites that bathe themselves in fire,
Braiding wraiths of rosy iridescence
Where the torrent's glories never tire.

Deep incessant thunder,
Majesties of sound,—
In sonorous wonder
Rock and hill resound.
Voices beyond counting in communion
Speak one vast, victorious voice of power ;
Fury, force, and beauty blend in union
To form the mighty accents of this hour.

As I feel thy fashion,
Thou transplendent flood,
Thy almighty passion
Cools my fevered blood.
To thy spray I consecrate my head ;
In thy iris hues my spirit dips ;
Seeks baptism in the torrent's bed ;
Seeks the rainbow's kiss upon my lips.

A DREAM

I drank my golden wine from a crystal cup
And laughing pleasure kissed my lips.
Boldly my playful soul went soaring up
As an airy maid in the ballet trips.

That crystal chalice tightly did I clasp
As if a friend's hand I would strain;
But, in my dream, it shattered in my grasp—
The fragments gashed through flesh and vein.

LOVE AND FEAR

Enchanted, charmed, in ecstasy, my dear,
With this first kiss that your young mouth has granted,
I find within my heart both love and fear
Pulse strangely in hot fire deep implanted.

You are so fair, so young and gay and good,
Your breath so soft, your loving hand so tender;
While I have dark and fiercely fevered blood,
And harsh my youthful toil my hands did render.

Fear hurts my spirit with a stab of pain:
Perhaps some hidden ill I may impart,
Something that might with filthy fingers stain
The spotless mirror of your virgin heart.

BJARNI JÓNSSON "FRÁ VOGI" (1863-1926)

Born at Midmörk, Rangárvallasýsla. Took his doctorate in philology from the University of Copenhagen, 1894. Instructor in German in the College of Iceland, and later lecturer in Greek in the University of Reykjavík. Member of the Althing from 1908 until his death. Translated many foreign works into Icelandic, from Björnson, Goethe, Hall Caine, Freytag, Garborg, Runeberg, and others. The last of these translations, completed shortly before his death, was Goethe's *Faust, Part I*. His bibliography of poetry includes: *Dauðastundin* (1893); *Baldursbrá* (1898); *Tækifæri og tíningur* (1906); *Kolbrún* (1910); and *Úrval úr frumsömdum og þýddum kvæðum* (1916).

EVENING PEACE

Beside the reefs, along the shore,
The peace of night is on the sea;
Deep slumber holds the greenwood-tree
And broods upon the grassy moor.

But zephyrs steal on tiptoe by
And pilfer kisses from the leaves,
While they in dreams accept the thieves
And whisper music in reply.

EINAR BENEDIKTSSON (*born 1864*)

Born at Ellidavatn, son of a judge. Graduated in law from the University of Copenhagen in 1892. Edited a newspaper in Reykjavík 1896-1898. Barrister in the court of appeal, 1898-1904, and prefect in Rangárvalla District, 1904-1907. Since then he has spent most of his time abroad, residing in England, and has travelled widely. Easily the most eminent living Icelandic poet, profound in thought and rich in language. Readers often complain of the obscurity of his thought, but the obscurity lies in the innate difficulty of his philosophical themes themselves rather than in any defect in the poet's powers of expression. His varied experience of many countries also find striking reflection in his work. His poetry as a whole constitutes the ideal of the educated younger generation of poets—cosmopolitan and eclectic in subject-matter yet strictly faithful to the claims of Icelandic language and style. Bibliography: *Sögur og Kvæði* (1897), *Hafblik* (1906), *Hrannir* (1913), *Vogar* (1921), *Pétur Gautur* (transl. of *Peer Gynt*, 1901, 1921).

RAIN

Who knows, when raindrops are descending
Which thirsty seed will highest grow?
Who knows, when Sabbath knees are bending,
Where God will greatest grace bestow?

Since it shall rain alike on all,
On ploughland as on stony ground—
Shall any tear unnoticed fall?
Shall any lost sheep not be found?

Who knows what status God has given—
Who here on earth is small, who great?
Each grass-blade feels the growth of heaven,
Each raindrop shares the ocean's fate.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

What sons of the dust know a sight more divine
Than the hall of the gods lit with amber fires?
See meadow and fjord under golden spires!
Who now could sit calmly at cards and wine?
The mountains as pure as a maiden shine,
Meek upon petals of roses sleeping;
The sands of the shingle are bright with brine;
The silver-mouthed rivers their loves are keeping;
And the farthest space shows a fiery face
Where the Northern Lights are leaping.

To highest heaven they stream and soar;
By mystical tents of gold they dance;
In billows of flame through that vast expanse
They break and ebb on a shadowy shore;
It seems as if hidden hands might pour
A shower of glittering gems of price;
By silent roads and the tombs of yore
Dim Death holds the land in a frosty vise;
And the glacial steep by the voiceless deep
Scans heaven with eyes of ice.

Then all the shadows of earth appear
To live as I look and assail me straight;
But though they should menace with stones of hate,
My heart is at peace in love sincere.
The heaven now arches so high and clear

That stars smile down and dispel disgust,
And the spirit is raised to a loftier sphere,
And a force divine breathes in bodies of dust;
We perceive our might and know by night
We are sons of the light, we trust.

But the ocean of heaven is deep and vast,
And high-sailed ships of the way grow weary
Seeking a Port o'er the billows dreary,
And losing their way in the gulfs at last;
For they find not Him from whose hand was cast
The fountain of light where the worlds begin.
Kneeling, with staff of prayer held fast,
Men wait at His temple their lives to win;
But the court is dark, and the door-bolts stark,
And silent the Spirit within.

JÓHANN MAGNÚS BJARNASON (*born 1866*)

Born at Medalnes, Nordur-Múlasýsla. Came with his parents to Nova Scotia at the age of nine, and was educated in the public schools there. Since 1889 a public school teacher in Western Canada. Now lives in Elfros, Saskatchewan. Best known for a number of volumes in prose which deal with the Iclander in the New World. One volume of poetry, *Ljóðmæli* (1898).

HOMESICK

They grant him both honour and gold,
They give him the best of the land,
But homesick his heart is, and cold,
And heeds but the call of one strand.

They lead him and lure him to joy,
To laughter and days of delight,
But there lingers a dreaming alloy
Of longing for valley and height.

No! Happiness here is not found,
All hopeless and restless is he,
For his heart and his homage are bound
Far hence in the billowy sea.

Then give him not glory or pence
Or grain-land beyond his desires,
But carry him, carry him hence
To the country and folk of his sires!

THORSTEINN GÍSLASON (*born 1867*)

Born at Stærri-Árskógur, Eyjafjardarsýsla. B.A., 1892. Doctorate from University of Copenhagen, 1893. Studied Scandinavian philology and literature in Copenhagen for several years. Has for over thirty years been editor of various Icelandic journals, of which *Lögrétta*, a Reykjavík weekly, is the most important. Has translated several novels from Danish, English, Polish, and French. Author of critical studies. Iceland's most eminent journalist. Excels in witty light verse. Bibliography: *Kvæði* (1893); *Nokkur Kvæði* (1904); *Ljóðmæli* (1920); *Dægurflugur* (1925).

THE GARTER

(Honi soit qui mal y pense)

Sigrid by the cliffs did sport her—
In this land no maid is smarter—
There she lost one day her garter,
Which I found and keep.

Now some fairy sprite is hiding
In that garter, boldly bidding,
All my thoughts to Sigrid guiding,
Passionate and deep.

All the current of my yearning
To a snowy knee is turning;
Even in my dreams I'm burning,
In that garter's hold.

If we fix a life-long barter,
As indeed she grants a charter,
I shall give the lass a garter
 Made of bridal gold.

SIGURJÓN FRIDJÓNSSON (*born 1867*)

Born at Sílalækur, Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla. Graduate of Eidar Agricultural School, 1887. Farmer at Einarssstadir, Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla. Fugitive poetry and fiction in periodicals.

AN ECHO ACROSS THE NIGHT

I heard from the Fields of the Dead
 An echo across the night,
I had sat and sung for a space,
 But my soul had grown silent quite.
To my eyes there came trooping the scenes of the past
That winter effaces and stifles at last.
All summer's unreached resolutions,
 All words of delight left unsaid,
Came sick'ning my silent spirit
 With woe—like a child born dead.

I dreamed of the hopes that were buried,
 Of mute sorrows still deeper down
That drifted from every quarter
 Of that restless, sleeping town.—
In the arms of grief I had lulled my yearning
And pangs had found peace in my tears' returning—
I had sat and sung for a space,
 And my soul had grown silent quite;
And I heard from the Fields of the Dead
 An echo across the night.

SIGURDUR JÚLÍUS JÓHANNESSON (*born 1868*)

Born at Lækur, Ölfes. B.A., 1897, and Cand. Phil., 1898, College of Reykjavík. Emigrated to America, 1899. M.D., National Medical University, Chicago, 1907. Since 1908, a practising physician, at present in Winnipeg, Canada. Bibliography: *Sögur og kvæði* (2 pts., 1900-1903); *Kvistir* (1910).

WHAT ART THOU, LIFE?

What art thou, life?

A billow that rises and surges

Driven through surf of flesh in the gulf of time,

Onward and upward for ever, as ever urges

A procreant power, eternal and sublime?

What art thou?

What art thou, life?

A bubble that sinks and disperses,

Borne from a bellowing cycle the years devour,

Where drowning spirit expires with bubbling curses?

Art thou the dying dream of a giant power?

What art thou?

GUDMUNDUR FRIDJÓNSSON (*born 1869*)

Born at Silalækur, brother of Sigurjón Fridjónsson. Chiefly self-taught, and has lived on the farm all his life. Out of his poverty as a laborer with a large family he managed to build up a small library, book by book, and to develop a pithy, individual style of writing. His ventures in fiction ultimately won recognition and high praise. His poetry, though inferior to his work in prose, is still of good quality. Bibliography: *Úr heimahögum* (1902); *Kvæði* (1925).

MY GOLD

The seed-buds are sprouting and springing from earth,
The sun puts an end to my sorrow,
The dreaming blue sky fills my spirit with mirth,
And the sea-breeze sings soft of the morrow.

I lie in the lee of a sheltering stone,
With the wind whistling gaily above me,
And, musing thus, warm in the sunshine alone,
Make verses for you, dear, who love me.

And where should I make them for you, if not here,
My noon-day of light and relieving,
Who bring all the wonder and warmth of the year
And banish the clouds of my grieving?

Thus whether I bow to the dimness of earth
Or strain towards the fountains of heaven,

I feel your warm beauty brood over my dearth
Like sunshine of noon to me given.

In a tent of diaphanous purple it seems
I play with the gold of your greetings.
Each thread in the warp and the woof of my dreams
Is bound to the loom of our meetings.

GUDMUNDUR MAGNÚSSON ("JÓN TRAUSTI")
(1873-1918)

Born at Rif á Sljettu. Brought up in great poverty, without education, and until the age of 20 was a farm laborer and common seaman. Then he became a printer's apprentice, first at Seydisfjörður and later in Reykjavík, and by diligent self-instruction began to acquire skill as a novelist. He spent 1896-1898 in Copenhagen in the printer's trade, and thereafter, with the exception of a trip to Germany and Switzerland at government expense in 1903, spent the rest of his life at Reykjavík. From 1910 on, he received a poet's stipend from the Althing. His early work, two collections of songs and a verse play, *Teitur* (1903), had aroused little popularity; but when in 1906 he published the novel *Höllu* and adopted the pen-name "Jón Trausti" he was received into popular favour. His almost inevitable lack of polish and good taste is compensated for by richness of imagination and keenness of insight. His best work is in his short stories, which are unsurpassed in their portrayal of Icelandic life. Bibliography (poetry only): *Heima og erlendis* (1899); *Teitur* (1903); *Kvæðabók* (1922).

THE COMING OF SUMMER

Sing a summer-song of life,
Sing the radiant morning,
Sing the present's glorious strife,
Sing the past's proud scorning.
Sing a song of dawning hopes,
Long bright days on sunlit slopes,

Sing, mid summer heather
A song, I pray,
Serene and gay,
A song of summer weather.

Eastward, rosy wreaths of cloud
To their queen are turning;
Holy harps are sounding loud;
Holy altars burning.
Summer comes, serene and glad,
Tripping sweetly, flower-clad.
Fields all bloom to meet her.
So sing, I pray,
A song that's gay,
A summer-song to greet her.

SIGFÚS BLÖNDAL (*born 1874*)

Born at Hjallaland, Húnavatnssýsla. Doctorate from the University of Copenhagen, 1898, in classical philology and English. In the Royal Library, Copenhagen, since 1901. Iceland's greatest living lexicographer, author of a monumental Icelandic-Danish dictionary. Contributor to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Has found time to write much graceful and scholarly poetry, of which one volume, *Drotningin í Algeirsborg*, was published in 1917. The following poem, written in his youth, was partly inspired, he tells us, by Jeleddin Rumi, the great Persian poet and mystic.

THE SPIRIT OF NATURE

I am the bright spring sun
That burns on its high blue way;
I am the stars that run
In their far, everlasting play;
I leap in the lightning loud
And cleave through the threatening cloud;
In the evening breeze with glee
I kiss and caress the sea;
I am the ocean asleep and the ocean awake
And the cold black crags where its thundering billows
break.

I lurk in the heart of song
When it wakens the eye's warm tear
Or lingers in joy along
To quiet all grief and fear.

I am all forms that love can measure,
Sin and innocence, pangs and pleasure;
 I am hatred, the scourge of life,
 I am rancour and care and strife.
For ever and ever I fly
Through the earth and the sea and the sky;
I love all things and I hate all things;
I am the source whence Creation springs;
 And none comprehend
 Though all gaze unseeing,
 Unable to rend
 The veil of my Being.

GUDMUNDUR GUDMUNDSSON (1874-1919)

Born at Hrólfstadahellir, Rangárvallasýsla. Graduate in arts and philosophy. Studied medicine. Many years in newspaper work. A lyric poet whose delicate sensibility of utterance challenges comparison with Jónas Hallgrímsson at his best. Bibliography: *Ljóðmæli* (1900); *Guðbjörg í Dal* (1902); *Strengleikar* (1903); *Gígjan* (1906); *Friður á jörðu* (1911); *Ljótaskifti* (1913); *Ljóð og kvæði* (1917).

LAMENT

Snows cloaked
 Mountain cliffs, and clinging
 Frosts assailed the shore.
Seas smoked,
 Heavy ice-floes flinging
 With a muffled roar.
Storms stroked,
 The strand with buffets sore.
And we sat by the bright hearth singing
Of sunshine and love's sweet lore.

The sun rode
 Ruddy to its pyre;
 Touched the moors with red.
High glowed
 The evening clouds, and higher
 O'er the calm sea spread.

Gold strowed
 Joy on the mountain's head.
But in by the dark hearth-fire
My hopes lay ashen and dead.

FROM THE NORTHERN OCEAN

I recall a cliff of mossy marble
 Under which we two last met,
 Ere our midnight sun had set.

Then the sun beside those arctic breakers
 Reared a faëry tent of red—,
 Gold the helmet on her head.

Black the deep about the fiery splendor,
 As we watched with shining eyes
 That Valkyrie of the skies.

To us both she prophesied of triumphs,
 Traced across the land and sea
 Signs of our prosperity.

Far away fled every doubt and terror;
 Holy night made chrism there
 With mute tears upon my hair.

But, alas, I sometimes have suspected
 That such thrills but ratify
 Humble love's expiring sigh.

Many another sun has set in glory
 But my fairest, tenderest flower
 Views no more this radiant hour.

Stars gleam cold across the icy barrens;
Care and yearning strangle sleep;
Wistful memories watch and weep.

Thus in song I seek surcease from sorrow,
Dedicate a dirge to thee,
Dearest love and agony.

GUTTORMUR JÓNSSON GUTTORMSSON (*born*
1878)

Born at Icelandic River, near Riverton, Manitoba. His family was a very old one from the eastern districts of Iceland. A farmer by profession. Perhaps the most original of the Icelandic poets now resident in Canada. Bibliography: *Jón Austfirðingur og nokkur smákvæði* (1909); *Bóndadóttir* (1920).

SNOWDRIFTS

Over blinding plains of snow
North winds sweep and smother;
Here they lay a snow-heap low,
There they raise another.

Borne on cloudy bridges high,
Blizzard-hosts are shrieking.
Swirling snowflakes eddy by
In Protean streaking.

Flung together, tossed and spread,
Snow-wreaths drift and glare,—
Winter from her frozen head
Combs her falling hair.

Crystal breakers rise and fall,
Ever ebbing, flowing;
All are merged in one vast pall
Ere the gale cease blowing.

In that play of frenzied storm
All things suffer change:
Lofty crests grow uniform,
Hollows filled and strange.

SIGURBJÖRN SVEINSSON (*born* 1878)

Born at Kongsgardur in Húnavatn District. School-teacher in Reykjavík, 1908-1919, and Vestmannaeyjar since 1919. Best known as the author of children's books, he has been called "the Hans Andersen of Iceland." His only poetry is a slender volume, *Nokkur Kvæði*, which appeared in 1906.

TIME AND SPACE

Beyond all space, beyond all time,
My spirit soared in cosmic flight.
I passed the bounds of height and depth;
I burst the bands of day and night.

I reached to touch the skirts of time,
To grasp creation's primal day;
I watched the universe of life
March by on its majestic way.

But though I gazed beyond the gulfs
Where countless star-seas rise and fall,
I saw but shadows of the God
Whose self is vaster than them all.

SIGURDUR SIGURDSSON (*born 1879*)

Born in Copenhagen. College of Iceland, 1894-1898. Graduate in pharmacy, 1906. Secretary to the prefect of Borgarfjardarsýsla, Arnarholt. Bibliography: *Tvístirnið* (with Jónas Gudlaugsson, 1906); *Ljóð* (1912).

CHRISTMAS EVE

Children's eve—with royal lights and Christmas-tree.
A peaceful snooze in church on mother's knee.
No Christmas-cat! But a little cart to draw,
And a rubber bird to squeeze at: Aw, aw, aw!

Children's eve—that all too soon must take to flight.
For after play and laughter comes "Good-night!"
Mama brings a piece of bread that heals all sorrow,
And the child sleeps, slice in hand, until to-morrow.

Grown-ups' eve—but varied store the years have brought.
Old memories come beating it on waves of thought.
Old folks' eve—from stooping heads frost melts away,
And haloed light shines over little children's play.

THORSTEINN TH. THORSTEINSSON (*born 1879*)

Born at Uppsalar in Svarfadardalur. Educated at Hólar in Hjaltadalur. Migrated to Canada, 1901, and has carried on a painting business in Winnipeg ever since. For the past five years has edited a semi-annual Icelandic magazine, *Saga*. Bibliography: *Þættir* (1918); *Heimhugi* (1921).

CANADA

I think of her as once she freely went
With breast of naked marble, bronzed and warm,
And all the offspring of that virgin form
Had bow and arrow, plumes, canoe, and tent.
But commerce came with iron government
Such scenes with settled tillage to transform,
To trap with fettering tax the human swarm,
And spoil the land with hasty ravishment.
But now she is the Country of Mankind,
Where Red and White in common tasks engage
Even in my Icelandic heart enshrined,
A fold where wandering sheep gain pasturage.
Here, where my love can build and burial find
Shall be for me a cherished heritage.

JOHANN SIGURJÓNSSON (1880-1919)

Born at Laxamýri, Thingeyjarsýsla. College of Iceland, 1896-1899. Studied veterinary surgery in the Royal Veterinary School at Copenhagen, but took to drama and published several plays, first in Danish and then rendered into Icelandic. His poetry was of a fugitive character.

THE CUP

Sitting alone and sipping
Through winter's long evening hours,
I breathe from my golden chalice
Scents of forgotten flowers.

Happiness long since faded
Lives in my heart again,
Sorrows long unremembered
Weep with their ancient pain.

Death who is waiting behind me
Bears in his hand, I think,
A cup that is deeper than midnight—
The darkness that I must drink.

UNNUR B. BJARKLIND (*born 1881*)

The chief poetess of Iceland. Her father was Benedikt Jónsson, who, though a farmer and self-educated, read and wrote in four languages. She is now the wife of the head factor of the co-operative stores for Thingeyjarsýsla, with headquarters at Husavik. Bibliography: *Kvæði* (1909); *Syngi, syngi svanir mínir* (1916); *Segðu mér að sunnan* (1920); and *Við yzta háf* (1926). She writes under the pen-name "Hulda."

THE BLUEST VIOLET

The bluest of violets, thou in truth
Once bloomed in thy father's grove
And tendered the fragrance of beauty and youth
In sight of the heavens above.
But thy beauty has vanished, and over it lies
The marble lament of love.

O happiest maiden! Thy tears would flow
In pity for each hurt thing.
Thy soul was as pure as the driven snow
And soft as the breeze of spring.
In the hearts of the people who knew thee best
Is thy loveliness lingering.

Thy smile was as gentle as suns in June,
And summer adorned thy cheeks,
Though darkening storms might importune

And rage on the mountain-peak.
When the tempest broke, the violet paled
And bowed in surrender meek.

Remembrance of thee is an anguished smart
To some in our dwellings nether.
Oh, never tear flower from flower apart
If their roots are twined together!
Men often have slain all the hopes of youth
Though wishing it golden weather.

LILIES OF WHITE

Lilies of white in a noon-day dream
Lift lashes of wondering eyes,
And breathe their scent at my window-sill
Like a lover's passionate sighs.

I sit and gaze at the summer light
In the violet heavens burning—
And think of an eye that is lit for me
With wonder and prayer and yearning.

EINAR P. JÓNSSON (*born 1881*)

Born at Flareksstadir, in the northwest of Iceland. Educated at the College of Reykjavík. Migrated to Canada, 1913. Associate Editor of *Lögberg*, Winnipeg, in 1916 and Editor-in-chief since 1927.

WINTER

I find thee a witch of the wastes, revealing
The wonder of snow-white ways;
The wind-swept wave, to thy music reeling,
Chants woe in a wild, chill phrase,
But wakes in the innermost weirs of feeling
The warmth of the summer's days.

Thou layest on land and lakes and flowers
The lightest of cerements warm;
The lingering lilt of thy harp-string showers
Its lays in a frost-sweet swarm,
And laughs in love as its gay strain dowers
The litany of the storm.

Capital sport we caught together
As comrades in that far land;
I claimed from the clasp of thy coldest weather
The kindling my veins demand;
And clapped as thou cast like a waving feather
A claymore in either hand.

Many, O Winter, have wished thee dying—
The weak are thy foes at heart;
They watch without wit thy runes, espying
No worth where thy frost-blooms start
Or in holy wonder of work defying
The world in its high, white art.

Though thou speakest oft with spasms of ire,
Thy spirit beneath is sweet;
Thy spitefullest tempests can yet suspire
Suspensions of summer's heat;
And I spy in thy breast as I spell in fire
A speech where God's pulses beat.

JÓHANN G. SIGURDSSON (1882-1906)

Born at Miklaholtsseli in Snæfellsnessýsla. Related on his mother's side to Dr. Jón Thorkelsson. His father was a farmer, and had poetic gifts. With the financial assistance of friends, he attended the College of Iceland and graduated (B.A.) with distinction in 1904. Tuberculosis had, however, already laid its hand upon him, and he passed away two years later. His short sketches and miscellaneous poems were collected by a classmate and published posthumously in 1909.

DELIRIUM

Winds beat the wall and sob in misery.
Carry to Hervör a farewell from me.
Tell Hervör that I knew no other choice.
Tell her to take good care of all her toys.
Say to my Hervör that I love her still;
But hearts grow weary, and the blood grows chill.
Say to my Hervör that she held my heart,
But in the wind's groan hears its pulse depart.
Say to my Hervör I would have her place
Some token on my grave, a gift of grace.
If Hervör be a wraith, and I a fool,
Go, cast my message in a coal-black pool.
Winds beat the wall and sob in misery.—
Soon, soon will Hervör come to comfort me.
Winds beat the wall and sobbingly depart.
Do you not feel the frost about my heart?

SIGURDUR NORDAL (*born 1886*)

Born at Selkirk, Manitoba, the son of Jóhannes Sigurdsson Nordal, but was taken by his father to Iceland at an early age. Educated at the College of Iceland and the University of Copenhagen. Holds the professorship of Old Norse in the University of Iceland at Reykjavík. Historian, poet, and critic. Since 1927, joint editor of the quarterly review, *Vaka*. Among his published works are *Fornar Ástir* (1919), and an edition of *Völuspá* (1923).

UP CLIFFS OF TWILIGHT

Up cliffs of twilight toiling,
Tired with strain and moiling,
I wove with hope's cords uncoiling
To keep me from death's despoiling.

I reached for gold's red provision,
The wretched man's gladdest vision,
But soon from that rash decision
Grew certain of death's derision.

The stones were stained with the bleeding
Of steps that stumbled, proceeding
In haste to the heights unheeding
The hampering rocks impeding.

Spuming in spiteful surges,
Sea-spectres lash on in scourges
In murk below—there emerges
For me but the wail of dirges.

I hang in the heights, slow-swaying
And haggard at death's delaying,
Afraid of my weak rope's fraying
And its frailty fast decaying.

I cling to the cliffs surrounded
And cloaked with a gloom unbounded;
Cordage of hope, fate-hounded,
I hold, lest I fall confounded.

"JAKOB THÓRARENSEN" (born 1886)

Born the son of a merchant in the north of Iceland. The above is a pen-name, but he is related to Bjarni Thórarensen on his mother's side. He now lives in Reykjavík and is a carpenter by trade. Regarded as one of the outstanding poets of the younger generation. Bibliography: *Snæljós* (1914); *Sprettir* (1919); *Kyljur* (1922); *Stillur* (1927).

DESERT DANGERS

Some awful Powers have been placed
Within the silence of the waste,
Adverse and alien to light and life.
They waken at the slightest sound.
Ah, rouse no echo from the ground!—
With one who calls they are at deadly strife.

They ask for silence and for peace,
And hate the murmuring release
Of chatter from a noisy human breast.
On their domain you must not fling
A button or a broken string—
They will not tolerate so rude a guest.

They rather find their happiness
In hideous northern blizzards' stress
When frosts are fierce and darkness reigns supreme.
Such deadly weather brings a ban
Against that puny plague called man,
Who nowhere in their wilds may then blaspheme.

To kill thee, friend, they ever seek
And hoard thy bones in deserts bleak,
Or wantonly thy carcass they despoil.
But he whom holy rites inter
Is proof against the pillager—
Their clutch is foiled by consecrated soil.

THE CATHEDRAL IN TRONDHJEM

Here silent art, yet wise and watchful-eyed,
Is smiling at a sea that gleams with fire.
Behold how holy truth and solemn pride
Shine radiantly from vaulted arch and spire!

The skill of masters, raised in reverent laud,
Is hewn in stone to voice the prayers of sense:
The mighty church itself says mass to God
Much better than a bishop's eloquence.

Herein are written runes of deathless worth—
The lessons to which ages will agree:
The culture, soul, and power of the North
Are blended in majestic trinity.

JÓNAS GUDLAUGSSON (1887-1916)

Born at Stadarhraun, Mýrasýsla. College of Iceland, 1901-1905. Journalism and literary work in Iceland till 1909, and thereafter in Norway and Denmark. His brilliant career was cut short by death when he was still under 30. Bibliography: *Vorblóm* (1905); *Dagsbrún* (1909); *Tvístirnið* (with Sigurdur Sigurdsson, 1906); *Sange fra Nordhavet* (in Danish, 1911); *Viddernes* (in Danish, 1912).

THE LOVE OF MY YOUTH

My heart is a church on deserted isles
Where death has laid waste the halls,
But still the sweet image of Mary smiles,
Thy remembrance, from vacant walls.

Young innocence pure as a sacred shroud
Was the veil of thy virgin merit;
Thy tenderness lay like an incense-cloud
O'er the altar that was my spirit.

I lost thee, my love, yet thy promptings inspire,
They speak as the shadows grow denser,
Like a lingering voice in an empty choir
Or scent from an empty censer.

STEFÁN SIGURDSSON "FRÁ HVÍTADAL"
(born 1887)

One of the finest masters of rhyme, and of technique generally, among the living poets is Stefán frá Hvítadal, whose life has been a melancholy struggle with disease. Five years ago he turned to the Roman Catholic church for comfort and published *Heilög Kirkja* (1924), a work of rare beauty, to commemorate his conversion. An earlier volume, *Óður einyrkjans*, had been issued in 1921.

FEAR

You dream of dying
 When late leaves fall,
And your heart is stricken
 With moods of gall—
You always are troubled
 When autumns call.

Does your flesh brood much
 On its own decay,
And a six-foot bed
 Of clammy clay?—
Our old Earth listens
 To you to-day.

And she is our mother,
 So warm and serene.
The prayers of the winter
 Are faded clean.—
In midsummer sunshine
 The Earth is green.

JAOOB JÓHANNESSON SMÁRI (*born 1889*)

Born at Saudafell, Dalasýsla. Studied Scandinavian philology at the University of Copenhagen, and took his M.A. degree in 1914. Instructor in Icelandic language and literature in the College of Iceland, Reykjavík. Bibliography: *Kaldavermisl* (1920).

THE HARP

Sometimes a still small voice of music steals
Across the ocean's din, the desert's hush,
The fragrant dreams of opening flowers—
But most when night my spirit seals.

Half-forgotten tales then rush
Across the mind's blue stream of misty hours.

Over life's cold expanse of snowy miles
A sleeping infant smiles.
It breathes—and the heart beats under
Those violet strains of wonder
Possessing my soul.

But up in the dark gulfs yonder
The ice-blue star-flames roll.

AXEL THORSTEINSSON (*born 1895*)

Born at Reykjavík, son of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson. Served in European War with the Canadian army. Since 1924, director of the Iceland Newspress Agency. Chief work in fiction. One volume of verse (*Ljóð og sögur*, 1916).

MY SWALLOW

You came from the south at set of night
And sang at my window-spray.
Ah, worn was your wing from the weary way,
Yet warmly you twittered a tender lay
Of love and eternal light.

You came from the south at set of night
And sang at my window-spray.
Your song all summer was sweet and gay;
But in southern lands was your faith alway
Till you flew on your autumn flight.

You came from the south at set of night
And sang at my window-spray.
But though days grow dark and cold, I'll stay
In the dreaming grace of your heavenly lay
Of love and eternal light.

THORBERGUR THÓRDARSSON (born 1895)

Born at Sudursveit in Austur-Skaftafeldssýsla, in an excessively "Fundamentalist" home. By way of reaction, he himself became a flaming radical, a theosophist, and an apostle of Esperanto. The theosophy has since been disowned. He attended the College of Iceland and the University, but did not graduate. He is now a public school teacher in Reykjavík. Eccentric in temperament, he is yet unsurpassed among living Icelandic poets in the savage force with which he employs the popular speech of the day. Bibliography: *Hvítir hrafnar* (1922).

DIANA IN ANNIS

The cooling of your youthful fires
Will soon, my dear, be quite complete.
Your face grows pale, your heart is cold,
And numbness dogs your failing feet.

Though with a purchased drug-store blush
Your shrivelled cheek is bright to see,
No person shows you deference
Or trusts your stale virginity.

Cease from this folly of display!
Soon passing hence—where now you flirt—
Your soul will be the Devil's wench,
Your flesh lie rotting in the dirt.

DAVID STEFANSSÓN (*born 1895*)

Born at Fagraskógi in Eyjafjörður. His father was a noted farmer and member of parliament. Descended on his mother's side from the Rev. David Guðmundsson, translator of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* into Icelandic. He proved his mettle this year by winning first prize in a crowded field for a commemorative ode on the Althing millennium of 1930. He had already published three volumes of verse: *Svartar fjaðrir* (1919); *Kvæði* (1922); *Kveðjur* (1924); and *Ný kvæði* (1929). The poem which follows is noteworthy for the way in which an undercurrent of connotation suggests the poignantly fugitive quality of human life and the loneliness of the individual.

I SAIL IN THE FALL

I

Summer is dying, is dying.
And cold is the breath of fall.
The waves are beginning to labor
And beat on the ocean-wall.
The leaves are blown from the branches.
The children have frost-reddened lips.
The birds are departing. Keen strain at
their cables
The storm-hearted ships.
I yield to a mighty power.
I am drawn by a hidden hand.

And the sea—the sea is calling
In tones I cannot withstand.
I am the bird that passes,
The ship that the tempests blow.
My song is a song of parting.
I came, and I go.

II

The storm leads away from harbor.
Surf beats the ocean-wall.
I came from the south in summer
And sail in the fall.
Prayers cannot hope to hold me.
I hack through the holiest ties—
Abandon the woman I worship,
The land of my boyhood skies.
I turn from the ship a moment
To speak the farewells I owe.
But my song is a song of parting.
I came, and I go.

III

I envy all that can scorn thee,
Thou wave-driving wind of the deep!—
The sun that glitters in glory,
And the lands that lie asleep;
The peaks in their crystal beauty,
Silent and heaven-high;
And the sphinx that keeps its secret
While the myriad years go by.

IV

I am borne by breeze and billow
From land on to land.

I ask not the people for praises
Or honoring hand.
I long to be blest with friendship,
But am everywhere ever alone,
Ever a man without country,
A vagrant in every zone.
But my song is a song of parting.
Surf beats the ocean-wall.
I came from the south in summer
And sail in the fall.

JÓN MAGNÚSSON (*born 1896*)

Born at Fossakoti in Borgárfjardarsýsla. Removed in 1908 to Thingvallasveit, and in 1916 to Reykjavík. A cooper by trade. Self-educated. Bibliography: *Bláskógar* (1925); *Hjarðir* (1929).

THE DESERTS

Waken now, thou wayfarer!
Midnight holds its breath.
All these wintry deserts
Are the ways of death.

There beside the mountain
Ancient ruins lie,
Where for warmth and shelter
Man might once apply.

Now no soul is stirring,
Windows show no light,
Only deadly freezing
Fills the murky night.

Here from life are hidden
Folk of former days.
Summer winds and blizzards
Wail their vanished ways.

Ruins of all ages
Are harlots of the street:

Empty homes of laughter,
Yearning, and defeat.

Waken now, thou wayfarer !
Night thy pathway keeps ;
But within these deserts
Mortal peril sleeps.

KRISTMANN GUDMUNDSSON (*born 1902*)

Born at Borgarfjörður, near Reykjavík. Early left an orphan and has made his own way ever since, turning his hand to a score of different forms of employment. Published a volume of poems, *Rökkursöngvar*, in 1922. In 1924 he migrated to Norway, where he has published in Norwegian three novels and a volume of short stories. Much of his fiction has been translated into English. Now resides in Oslo.

SING A SONG OF DREAMS TO ME

Sing a song of dreams to me.
—Sunset fades to gloaming.
Down the deeps of the twilight sea
The Norn of grief is roaming.
Sing a song of dreams to me.

Sweetheart, little sweetheart,
In your warm arms fold me!
—O'er dark waves comes gliding
Endless night to hold me.
Sweetheart, little sweetheart.

Sunshine-glory vanishes.
Darkness broods above me.
But I smile at grief and death
Just because you love me.
Sunshine-glory vanishes.

Through all years, and ages too,
Love lives on to show
How life's sunshine still returns
In the world below.
—Through all years, and ages too.

Sing a song of dreams to me,
For my dreams are best
When I dream I hold you fast,
Lost to all the rest.
Sing a song of dreams to me.

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